



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Elwing, J. and Roukema, Aren (2014) Correspondences - Online Journal For The Academic Study of Western Esotericism, Volume 2.2. Aren Roukema, London, UK.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/11874/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

# Correspondences

Online Journal for the  
Academic Study of Western Esotericism

*Editors*

Jimmy Elwing and Aren Roukema

2.2 (2014)

© Contributing authors 2014

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

All articles are available at <http://www.correspondencesjournal.com>

Editorial contacts:

Jimmy Elwing: [jimmy.elwing@correspondencesjournal.com](mailto:jimmy.elwing@correspondencesjournal.com)

Aren Roukema: [aren.roukema@correspondencesjournal.com](mailto:aren.roukema@correspondencesjournal.com)

Book Review Editor

Egil Asprem: [egil.asprem@correspondencesjournal.com](mailto:egil.asprem@correspondencesjournal.com)

ISSN 2053-7158 (Online)

Editorial board: Francesco Baroni (Université de Lausanne), Henrik Bogdan (University of Gothenburg), Juan Pablo Bubello (Universidad de Buenos Aires), Dylan Burns (Universität Leipzig), Peter Forshaw (Universiteit van Amsterdam), Christian Giudice (University of Gothenburg), Amy Hale (St. Petersburg College), Boaz Huss (Ben-Gurion University of Negev), Birgit Menzel (Universität Mainz).

# Contents

Editorial 119

ROBERT A. SAUNDERS. Primetime Paganism: Popular-Culture Representations of Europhilic Polytheism in *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings* 121

CHRISTOPHER A. PLAISANCE. Magic Made Modern? Re-evaluating the Novelty of the Golden Dawn's Magic 159

ROBERTO BACCI. Transmutation and Homogenization of Consciousness in Italian Esotericism during the Fascist Period: Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei Maghi* and Julius Evola's *Maschera e Volto dello Spiritualismo Contemporaneo* 189

## Book Reviews

Dylan M. Burns. *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism*. Reviewed by MATTHEW J. DILLON 215

Peter Staudenmaier. *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era*. Reviewed by STEFAN ARVIDSSON 219

Per Faxneld and Jesper Aa. Petersen, eds. *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*. Reviewed by ETHAN DOYLE WHITE 223

Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler. *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition*. Reviewed by DAMON ZACHARIAS LYCOURINOS 227

Marco Pasi. *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*. Reviewed by PETER STAUDENMAIER 233



## Editorial

### A Forum for Correspondences

**Aren Roukema**

E-mail: [aren.roukema@correspondencesjournal.com](mailto:aren.roukema@correspondencesjournal.com)

The central goal of this journal is indicated by its title. *Correspondences* was founded in order to provide a freer flow of conversation among those engaged in research and analysis of the wide diversity of traditions gathered under the umbrella of Western esotericism. We continue to operate according to this mandate, encouraging researchers of all levels and backgrounds to dialogue with others inside and outside the field via quality, well-researched articles, while also attempting to widen our scope further to include research produced outside the ivory tower—a structure that social and political pressures are making less and less amenable to those who wish never to leave its high-walled courtyards.

Thus far, achieving our conversational mandate has gone rather well. We have been pleased to provide a publication vehicle for early researchers as well as more well-known scholars. We have been able to construct an editorial board and panel of reviewers that represent research communities all over the academic world, as well as the analytical methods and priorities of a number of different disciplines. Our website analytics show that the articles published in *Correspondences* are read around the world in significant numbers. While this correspondence between researchers has largely been of a broad, impersonal nature, we have provided a platform for more directed conversation as well. This platform is best exemplified in this, our third issue, as Christopher Plaisance's article, *Magic Made Modern?*, dialogues with Alison Butler's research on modern occult magic, while a much enhanced Reviews section enables

© 2014 Aren Roukema.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

discourse surrounding exciting new publications in a variety of fields. We will continue to provide an open access forum for such discussion and we encourage any and all to join in correspondence by submitting innovative, high quality research related to the burgeoning field of Western esotericism.

In the near future we hope to up the conversational ante even further. For example, we intend to introduce a function on our website that will allow instantaneous, informal responses to the articles that we publish. We have also decided to change the publication model of the journal to take advantage of the quick turnover time between submission and publication that is made possible by web-based publishing. All accepted articles will now be published as fast as they can be evaluated via peer-review, revised, edited, and typeset. Articles will be published as soon as possible, rather than published biannually in a collected issue, as in a conventional print-based model. All articles published in a particular year will then be gathered into a volume related to that year to enable easier access by libraries, databases, and search engines.

These and other improvements to the *Correspondences* project await us on the horizon. For now, please enjoy issue 2.2's excellent articles and reviews. In addition to Plaisance's article, this issue features an analysis of modern pagan elements in primetime television by Robert A. Saunders, as well as Roberto Bacci's in-depth discussion of esoteric views of consciousness in Fascist Italy, along with reviews by Peter Staudenmaier, Stefan Arvidsson, Matthew J. Dillon, Ethan Doyle White, and Damon Zacharias Lycourinos. We hope you enjoy these submissions to the greater debate framed by Western esotericism, and encourage you to add your voice to our correspondences.

# Primetime Paganism: Popular-Culture Representations of Europhilic Polytheism in *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*\*

**Robert A. Saunders**

E-mail: [robert.saunders@farmingdale.edu](mailto:robert.saunders@farmingdale.edu)

## Abstract

This article provides a critical examination of the politico-religious content of the highly successful television series *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*. By comparing and contrasting two very different representations of ethnically-marked “European” polytheism, I seek to uncover underlying trends in contemporary attitudes towards reconstructed “native faith” among peoples of European origin, particularly in contrast to “imported” monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). This article makes several tentative claims about the protean nature of religious identity in the context of popular culture. First, that traditional filmic treatments of pagans *qua* villains is shifting, with contemporary popular culture allowing for more nuanced framing of Western forms of polytheism. Secondly, that such popular-culture representations of paganism have direct impact on certain contemporary Pagans’ personal spiritual paths by promoting and influencing the “invention of tradition” among a population which manifests non-traditional religious identities.

## Keywords

paganism, popular culture, identity politics, *Vikings*, *Game of Thrones*

---

\* I would like to thank Michelle Fino, Joel Vessels, Rolf Stavneim, and Egil Asprem for their helpful comments on the draft of this article, as well as the anonymous referees for their thoughtful reviews and critical insights. Additionally, my thanks go out to Kristen Ardigo of HBO for her assistance in securing permission to use the images which appear in this article.

## Introduction

Representations of paganism in popular culture are a highly politicized affair, particularly since the rise of the religious right in the United States in the late 1960s, and similar conservative shifts in other parts of the Western world. Anti-“paganism” crusaders have condemned various targets from the rock musical *Hair* (1967) to *The Twilight Saga* (2008–2012) fantasy film series. Under the broad and amorphous rubric of “paganism,” critics have included a host of content, themes, and tropes, everything from lycanthropy and voodoo to crystals and angels.<sup>1</sup> In North America, popular culture’s role in “corrupting” youth via romanticized depictions of the occult, psychic powers, and magic is a frequent refrain among cultural conservatives, Christian leaders, and other groups who espouse traditional values and mores.<sup>2</sup> In “post-Christian” Europe, campaigns against “pop-culture paganism” have been less strident, but are nonetheless extant, including campaigns against pagan Black Metal in Scandinavia, attacks on J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series by the Catholic Church, and bans on Halloween celebrations in Russia.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, a number of scholars have demonstrated the influence of mass media on the religious identity of contemporary Pagans, specifically practitioners of Wicca. For such Pagans, novels, films, music, and television series are foundational elements of their religious identities, thus affirming the centrality of popular culture in “real world” practices and politics.<sup>4</sup> While I will explore the recent

---

<sup>1</sup> A clarification of terminology is in order here. In this article, I use the capitalized “Paganism” and “Neopaganism” to refer to contemporary religious practices and paths associated with nature-venerating polytheism (e.g., Druidry, Ásatrú, and Romuva), whereas the lower-case “paganism” refers undifferentiated religious practices and beliefs associated with the various folk traditions of pre-Christian Europe (which, in certain cases, may also include contemporary Paganism). For more on the nomenclature debate, see Ethan Doyle White, “In Defense of Pagan Studies: A Response to Davidsen’s Critique,” *Pomegranate* 14, no. 1 (2012): 5–21.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Kyle, “The Occult Roars Back: Its Modern Resurgence,” *Direction* 29, no. 2 (2000): 91–99 and Bill Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See, respectively, Kennet Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’: Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 58, no. 4 (2011): 514–44; Cindy Wooden, “New Attention Given to 2003 Cardinal Ratzinger Letter on Harry Potter,” *Catholic News Service*, 14 July 2005; and Kirit Radia, “Russia’s War on Halloween.” *ABC News.com*, 26 October 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See Carrol L. Fry, “The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marian Zimmer Bradley’s Novels,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (1993): 67–80; Sabina Magliocco, “Ritual is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art Among Contemporary Pagans,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State Universi-

history of pop-culture paganism (and its critics) in this article, my focus is on a highly circumscribed aspect of this larger phenomenon: positive representations of Europhilic polytheism in contemporary mass media. This is done through a critical analysis of indigenous, place-based polytheism in two highly successful, theologically-preoccupied television series: the History Channel's *Vikings* (2013–present) and HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–present).<sup>5</sup> *Vikings* follows the exploits of Ragnar Lothbrok, his wife Lagertha, and his brother Rollo, three characters loosely based on historical figures from medieval Scandinavia. Adapted from George R. R. Martin's series of epic fantasy novels entitled *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–present), *Game of Thrones* details a grand conflict between a handful of noble houses seeking to dominate Westeros, an island (resembling Britain) off the coast of a much larger world-continent named Essos (suggestive of Eurasia).<sup>6</sup> The series is set in a medieval-like world replete with sorcerers, dragons, giants, and the walking dead.

These series have been selected for two reasons: the centrality of religious conflicts (specifically polytheism versus monotheism) in their narrative arcs and their popularity among both viewers and critics.<sup>7</sup> Rather than focusing on “pastiche paganism”<sup>8</sup> so often analyzed by scholars and condemned by cultural conservatives, this article's subject matter is far narrower in scope. By focusing on representations of native “European” polytheism, I hope to demonstrate the increasing influence of popular culture on postmodern religious identity.

---

ty of New York Press, 1996), 93–120; Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloï, eds. *New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Maria Beatrice Bittarello, “Shifting Realities? Changing Concepts of Religion and the Body in Popular Culture and Neopaganism,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 2 (2008): 215–32; and Helen A. Berger, and Douglas Ezzy, “Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 501–14.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the television series, I also analyze the content of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* epic fantasy novels, upon which the series is based.

<sup>6</sup> This is particularly evinced by the notion that Westeros' “southrons” are pampered and effete, while the “northmen” are uncouth and uncultured, closely mirroring the cultural divide in contemporary England; see Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (Boston and London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> According to *The Guardian* newspaper, *Game of Thrones* had become the “most talked about,” “critically acclaimed,” and “widely watched” show on television by 2014; see Sarah Hughes, “Sopranos Meets Middle-earth: How Game of Thrones took over Our World,” *The Guardian*, 22 March 2014. In its first season, *Vikings* emerged as the top new U.S. cable series of the year and earned three Emmy nominations.

<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, a mixture of Gardnerian/Alexandrian Wicca and occultisms drawn from various European and non-European sources; these subsets of Wicca are named for their founders, Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) and Alex Sanders (1926–1988), respectively.

In the case of *Vikings*, the contest between medieval Christianity and Nordic paganism is overt, forming much of the plotline of Season One and thus requiring little in the way of intellectual excavation. In *Game of Thrones*, an allegorical reading of the text is employed, positing the indigenous, polytheistic, nature-revering religions of Westeros as “European” and the foreign, proselytizing, monotheistic faith of R’hllor as Christianity (and Islam).<sup>9</sup> The primary aim of this article is to shed light on the growing acceptability of Europhilic paganism in contemporary Western popular culture, specifically the paths of Heathenism and Celtic Reconstructionism. I argue that this is emblematic of larger socio-political trends associated with anti-egalitarianism, anti-modernism, and anti-globalism triggered by the post-Cold War international order.<sup>10</sup> In the conclusion, I connect this representation to the invention of tradition, arguing that such cultural production is not neutral, and, in fact, such pop-cultural forms of Western esotericism have important effects on politico-religious identity among certain subsets of society.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> This reading departs from Martin’s declaration that the religion of R’hllor is loosely based on Zoroastrianism; see Jaron Daniël Schoone, “‘Why Is the World So Full of Injustice?’: Gods and the Problem of Evil,” in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords*, ed. Henry Jacoby (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 154–67.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Alain Minc, *Le nouveau Moyen Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); Marion Bowman, “Cardiac Celts: Images of the Celts in Paganism,” in *Paganism Today*, ed. Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey (London: Thorsons, 1996), 242–51; Lorne L. Dawson, “Anti-Modernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism: Struggling with the Cultural Significance of New Religious Movements,” *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1998): 131–58; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University, 2002); Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness?’”; David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy, and Christine Milligan, “Timing and Spacing Celtic Geographies,” in *Celtic Geographies: Old Cultures, New Times*, eds. David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–17; Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Joshua Buckley and Michael Moynihan, “What Does It Mean to be a Radical Traditionalist?” *TYR: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 1 (2002): back cover; Alain de Benoist, *On Being a Pagan*, trans. Jon Graham (Atlanta: Ultra, 2005); Lauren Bernauer, “Modern Germanic Heathenry and Radical Traditionalists,” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, ed. Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2006), 265–74; and Michael Spiegel, “Character in a Post-National World: Neomedievalism in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” *Mosaic* 43, no. 3 (2010): 119–34.

<sup>11</sup> See Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–13 and Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 25–48.

## The Pop-Culture “Pagan”: Vampires, Witches, and Wiccans in Mainstream Media

Establishing the genesis of popular culture’s fascination with paganism is problematic. Certainly, the Romantic Movement—which glorified Teutonic gods, the chaos of Nature, and pre-Christian tribalism—is an obvious starting point, though representations of pagans and paganism in popular fiction go back much earlier in the history of Western Civilization.<sup>12</sup> The publication of folkloric national epics, including *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (1812), *The Kalevala* (1835), and *Lāčplēsis* (1888), sparked a popular interest in the pre-Christian past of the various European peoples. The same can be said of quasi-academic works like James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* and Charles Leland’s *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*. The long nineteenth century, characterized by the rise of industry and the dawn of modernity, stimulated an artistic backlash which saw pagan themes glorified in the works of William Butler Yeats, Richard Wagner, Isadora Duncan, and others. While Britain’s lifting of the centuries-old ban on witchcraft in 1951 is often cited as the key catalyst for the emergence of contemporary Paganism in Western Europe and North America,<sup>13</sup> popular-culture representations of paganism *qua* pre-Christian, polytheistic practice remained rather diffuse until the late 1960s, when various forms of counter-culture entered into the realm of mass media. The same cannot be said for more generic depictions of the occult, which have been a regular subject of popular culture from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* onwards.

During the 1930s, an obsession with the supernatural and the macabre became the norm in many avenues of cultural production, particularly Hollywood films and the emergent medium of comic books;<sup>14</sup> however, a cultural shift in the 1950s tamped down cultural producers’ enthusiasm for such themes,

---

<sup>12</sup> See Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations: C.1650 – C.1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); David Waldron, “Witchcraft for Sale! Commodity vs. Community in the Neopagan Movement,” *Nova Religio* 9, no. 1 (2005): 32–48; Peter Jennings, *Pagan Paths: A Guide to Wicca, Druidry, Asatru, Shamanism and Other Pagan Practices* (New York: Random House, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> See, respectively, Sean Cubitt, “The Supernatural in Neo-Baroque Hollywood,” in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 47–65 and B. W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

except when clearly yoked to larger questions of identity associated with the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> The dawning of the so-called “Age of Aquarius” signaled a transformation in popular culture wherein various forms of paganism/Paganism, especially the practice of witchcraft, nature religion, and new forms of religion delinked from Christianity (and its Abrahamic brethren, Judaism and Islam) came into vogue. Festivals at Glastonbury, Stonehenge, and other sites of “ancestral stones” quickly entered into the mainstream media culture, marked most vividly by the premier of the motion picture *The Wicker Man* (1973).<sup>16</sup> The cult film, which depicts a Celtic Reconstructionist sect luring a devout Christian to their Hebridean island for a Beltane sacrifice in a wicker colossus, brought the phenomenon of (murderous) contemporary Paganism into the movie houses of Britain and North America.<sup>17</sup> *The Wicker Man* dovetailed with both the “cult scare” of the 1970s and the explosion of interest in Earth-based and New Age religions.<sup>18</sup> A decade later, author Marion Zimmer Bradley introduced a generation to the magic-practicing pagan women of Arthurian times

---

<sup>15</sup> See Cynthia Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination* (Madison: Popular Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> See Steven Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> *The Wicker Man* is based on David Pinner’s 1967 novel *Ritual*, which was set in Cornwall, not Scotland. A 2006 film remake starring Nicholas Cage retooled the original plot by transforming the religious community into a women-only Goddess sect residing on an island off the coast of the U.S. state of Washington; see Mikel J. Koven, “The Folklore Fallacy. A Folkloristic/Filmic Perspective on *The Wicker Man*,” *Fabula* 48, no. 3–4 (2007): 270–80; Benjamin Franks, Stephen Harper, Jonathan Murray, and Gary Carpenter, eds., *The Quest for the Wicker Man: History, Folklore and Pagan Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2007); Adrian Ivakhiv, “Cinema of the Not-Yet: The Utopian Promise of Film as Heterotopia,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5, no. 2 (2011): 186–209; and Marion Gibson, “Wicker Men and Straw Dogs: Internal Colonialism in Celtic Novels and Films 1968–1978,” *National Identities* 15, no. 2 (2013): 139–56.

<sup>18</sup> Following 1968, the U.S. media sensationalized cult activity, resulting in what might be deemed mass “panic.” The 18 November 1978 events at the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project in Guyana marked the apex of this trend; however, a subsequent wave of hysteria occurred in the 1980s following a series of often spurious reports of Satanic cults engaging in ritual abuse and human sacrifice; see James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985) and David Frankfurter, “The Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic as Religious-Studies Data,” *Numen* 50, no. 1 (2003): 108–117. For an overview of the evolution of contemporary Paganism, see, for instance, Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), and Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman Altamira, 2006).

in *The Mists of Avalon*, presaging a flurry of pro-feminist, Wicca-friendly pop literature, motion pictures, and other media.<sup>19</sup>

From the 1980s onward, the growing power of cultural conservatism and its frothy critiques of paganism in American society, and Western Civilization more generally,<sup>20</sup> did little to curtail the proliferation of occult themes in popular culture, as evidenced by the popularity of media products such as the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game, dark metal music, the *Conan* comics series and motion pictures, and the “teen witch” genre, including *The Craft* (1996), *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and *Charmed* (1998–2006).<sup>21</sup> Since the dawn of the new millennium, the trend has quickened with the undeniable worldwide success of the novel *cum* film franchises of *Harry Potter* (novels, 1997–2007; films, 2001–2011) and *Twilight* (novels, 2005–2008; films, 2008–2012), as well as Peter Jackson’s film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* saga (2001, 2002, 2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012, 2013, 2014). Not surprisingly, “culture warriors”<sup>22</sup> and Christian fundamentalists have sought to discourage consumption of such media due to their purported tendencies to weaken Judeo-Christian values, traditional morality, and parental authority.<sup>23</sup> However, the Religious Right’s opprobrium has

---

<sup>19</sup> See Fry, “The Goddess Ascending” and J. Lawton Winslade, “Teen Witches, Wiccans, and ‘Wanna-Blessed-Be’s’: Pop-Culture Magic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” *Slayage: The Journal of the Joss Whedon Studies Association* 1, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Constance Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1983); Bob Larson, *Larson’s Book of Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999); Texe Marrs, *Dark Secrets of the New Age: Satan’s Plan for a One World Religion* (Austin: Rivercrest Publishing, 2000); Pat Matriciana, *Popculture Paganism* (Jacksonville: Jeremiah Films, 2009); and William Schnoebelen, *Wicca: Satan’s Little White Lie* (Ontario: Chick Publications, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> See Maia A. Gemmill and Daniel H. Nexon, “Children’s Crusade: The Religious Politics of *Harry Potter*,” in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 79–101; Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2003); Jeffrey Richards, “From Christianity to Paganism: The New Middle Ages and the Values of ‘Medieval’ Masculinity,” *Cultural Values* 3, no. 2 (1999): 213–34; and Winslade, “Teen Witches, Wiccans, and ‘Wanna-Blessed-Be’s.’”

<sup>22</sup> See Bill O’Reilly, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); NCR, “The ‘Culture-Warrior’ Model,” *National Catholic Reporter* 48, no. 22 (2012): 28; and John Dombrink, “After the Culture War? Shifts and Continuities in American Conservatism,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 42, no. 3 (2012): 301–21.

<sup>23</sup> See Roberta Harrington, “Fundamentalists in a Frenzy over Power of the Occult,” *Sunday Herald*, 17 October 1999, 10; Richard Kyle, “The Occult Roars Back: Its Modern Resurgence,” *Direction* 29, no. 2 (2000): 91–99; Marc Lavine, “Opponents Warn of Satanic Plot as Harry

been typically focused on popular culture products that appeal to youth, thus perhaps explaining why neither *Vikings* nor *Game of Thrones* has received much attention from the various corners of society that so vociferously denounced Buffy, Bella, and Bilbo, although the two series' undeniable appeal to certain socially conservative (though decidedly anti-Christian) ideals may also partially explain this lack of criticism.<sup>24</sup>

### Radical Traditionalism and Celticism: Paganesque Identity Politics in Europe and the “White Dominions”

While enthusiasm for popular culture products which glorify Europe's pagan past partially stems from larger societal trends including a shift away from traditional religion to more personalized mystical experiences and understandings, a desire for recreating the (lost/imagined) bonds of community rent asunder by liquid modernity can also be viewed as an important factor.<sup>25</sup> Such media craft a realm where the *primitive* is valorized and the *civilized* is rejected. The ongoing primitivist backlash seems to be a rather predictable outcome of periods of social conflict and populist alienation.<sup>26</sup> Contemporary Western

---

Potter Hoopla Snowballs,” *Agence France-Presse*, 16 November 2001; Stephen Hume, “Fantasy Casts Welcome Spell in Age of Uncertainty,” *Vancouver Sun*, 9 November 2001, F2; Tim Stanley, “Blood Oath Twilight Generation,” *The Spectator*, 29 December 2012, 10. However, it should be noted that there have also been end-of-days, occult-themed media products which reinforce conservative Christian values and worldviews, including the *Left Behind* series (1995–2007); see Jason Dittmer, “The Geographical Pivot of (the End of) History: Evangelical Geopolitical Imaginations and Audience Interpretation of *Left Behind*,” *Political Geography* 27, no. 3 (2008): 280–300.

<sup>24</sup> Targeting a much younger demographic, and lacking the explicit contrast (and competition) between polytheism and monotheism, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* (2005–2009) series of novels (and film adaptations) has nonetheless been condemned by certain Christians for presenting a multifaceted and attractive “substitute for the Christian worldview” rooted in pagan theology and values, and even as a tool in the resurgence of paganism; see J. B. Cheaney, “Among the Pagans: Percy Jackson and the Olympians,” *Redeemed Reader*, 15 March 2011, accessed on 7 February 2014. <http://www.redeemedreader.com/2011/03/among-the-pagans-percy-jackson-and-the-olympians/>

<sup>25</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge and Boston: Polity, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> See Truzzi, “The Occult Revival as Popular Culture”; Frank Trentmann, “Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (1994): 583–626; Richards, “From Christianity to Paganism”; and Daniel Chirot, “A Clash of Civilizations or of Paradigms?: Theorizing Progress and Social Change,” *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001): 341–62.

Paganism in its various forms represents one strain of this epiphenomenon, which also includes extreme environmentalism, “prepper”-style survivalism, and anarcho-primitivism.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting an interest in ethnic heritage as much as spirituality,<sup>28</sup> Euro-centric Paganism entails religious affiliation with one (or more) of the indigenous, pre-Christian faiths of the European continent. These can be roughly categorized into one of four geographic fields: northern; western; southern; and eastern (see Table I).<sup>29</sup> While not necessarily mutually exclusive, most contemporary Western Pagans affix their religious identity to one of these traditions, though often supplementing their beliefs and practices with influences from other religious traditions, most notably shamanism, New Age and “invented” religions, and/or various Eastern faiths (especially Hinduism and Buddhism). The embrace of contemporary Western Paganism is certainly not confined to the European continent; on the contrary, the United States, Canada, and Australia—the most populous of the so-called “White Dominions”<sup>30</sup> established through British overseas imperialism—have all seen a dramatic upsurge in the practice of reconstructed Paganism and new religious movements (NRMs) associated with European identity. Among the *völkisch* strains of Germanic (northern) and even Celtic (western) Paganism, the connection between religious and ethnic identity is acute, and often important to practitioners’ political culture.<sup>31</sup> In some cases, this affinity is so strong as to be accurately classified as a form of “white separatism.”<sup>32</sup> Such orientations are often in direct contrast with the pluralist, relativist, egalitarian, and globalist orientations of many Wiccans and Goddess Worshipers who also identify as

---

<sup>27</sup> See, respectively, Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); Emily Matchar, “Inside the Prepper Survivalist Movement” *Outside*, 10 July 2012; and John Zerzan, *Future Primitive Revisited* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> See Collin Cleary, “Knowing the Gods,” *TYR: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 1 (2002): 23–40.

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that recent archeological research demonstrates that distinguishing between these traditions in the ancient world is highly problematic, given the fluidity of belief and the prevalence of “religious borrowing” across Europe, particularly in the north of the continent. However, the vehemence with which current Pagans delineate the borders between their religiogeographic identities only serves to reinforce the argument that the “invention of tradition” is key to understanding current trends. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of the draft of this article for pointing this out.

<sup>30</sup> See Charles More, *Britain in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> See Egil Asprem, “Heathens Up North: Politics, Polemics, and Contemporary Norse Paganism in Norway,” *Pomegranate* 10, no. 1 (2008): 41–69.

<sup>32</sup> See Betty A. Dobratz, “The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racialist Movement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2 (2001): 287–301.

Table I: *Spatio-Cultural Groupings of Contemporary Western Paganism*

Religiogeographic Orientation	Ethno-Linguistic Affiliation(s)	(Neo)Pagan Paths
Northern	Germanic	Ásatrú, Heathenry, Odinism, Wotanism, Theodism, Ariosophy
Western	Celtic and Celto-Romano	Druidry, “Old Religion,” Celtic Reconstructionism, Wicca, Goddess Worship
Southern	Hellenic and Latinate	Hellenismos, Religio Romana, Stregheria ( <i>la vecchia religione</i> )
Eastern	Baltic, Slavic, and Finno-Ugric	Romuva, Dievturība, Ridnovira, Rodnoverie, Vedism, Maausk, Suomenusko, Ösmagyar Vallás, Oshmari-Chimari, Vos

Adapted from Robert A. Saunders, “Pagan Places: Towards a Religiogeography of Neopaganism.”

Pagan;<sup>33</sup> however, such a confrontational esprit does have parallels in Baltic and Slavic (eastern) Pagan traditions which glorify the “warrior culture,” affirm traditional gender roles, openly espouse ethnocentrism, and critique contemporary civilizational norms.<sup>34</sup>

Correspondingly, there exists a suite of parallel political orientations which mobilize contemporary Paganism for ideological purposes, roughly paralleling the ways in which the “great” faiths (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) are employed for political projects in the twenty-first century. Radical Traditionalism (RT) is perhaps the most obvious of these ideologies. Drawing inspiration

<sup>33</sup> See Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> See Victor Shnirelman, “‘Christians! Go Home’: A Revival of Neo-Paganism between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia (An Overview),” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 2 (2002): 197–211; Marlène Laruelle, “Alternative Identity, Alternative Religion? Neo-Paganism and the Aryan Myth in Contemporary Russia,” *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2008): 283–301; Réka Szilárdi, “Ancient Gods—New Ages: Lessons from Hungarian Paganism,” *Pomegranate* 11, no. 1 (2009): 44–57; Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson, *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon: Acumen, 2013), and Mariya Lesiv, *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2013).

from the works of Julius Evola (1898–1974), the editors of the journal *TYR: Myth—Culture—Tradition* represent the primary mouthpiece of this movement. Joshua Buckley and Michael Moynihan define the concept of Radical Traditionalism as such:

It means to reject the modern, materialist reign of “quantity over quality,” the absence of any meaningful spiritual values, environmental devastation, the mechanization of over-specialization of urban life, and the imperialism of corporate monoculture, with its vulgar “values” of progress and efficiency. It means to yearn for the small, homogenous tribal societies that flourished before Christianity—societies in which every aspect of life was integrated into a holistic system.<sup>35</sup>

In her study of the connection between RT and various strains of Norse Ásatrú and Germanic Heathenry, religion studies scholar Lauren Bernauer contends that Radical Traditionalism provides a “philosophical depth” to the faith, as well as providing a reservoir of ideological texts (including writings by Oswald Spengler, Anthony Ludovici, and Alain de Benoist, among others).<sup>36</sup> Through RT’s interest in Western esotericism, other avenues of intellectual and ideological interrogation are also plumbed, specifically the Ariosophy of Guido von List and Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky.<sup>37</sup> In addition to the intellectual activities of *TYR*, Radical Traditionalist thought is also articulated in more popular forms, namely in folk metal lyrics by bands such as Amon Amarth, Metsatöll, Turisas, and Allerseelen, among others.<sup>38</sup> Often aligning their words with the “values” of Vikings and other pre-Christian peoples of northern and central Europe, neo-folk metal bands are well known for including anti-civilizational/anti-Christian rhetoric in their songs. As one commentator observes, Viking black metal and similar genres evince “an extreme reaction against mainstream European culture [while] emphasizing a natural connection with ancestral lands [...] All however see Christianity as the common enemy.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently,

---

<sup>35</sup> Buckley and Moynihan. “What Does It Mean to be a Radical Traditionalist?” back cover.

<sup>36</sup> Bernauer, “Modern Germanic Heathenry and Radical Traditionalists.”

<sup>37</sup> See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> See Kennet Granholm, “Ritual Black Metal: Popular Music as Occult Mediation and Practice,” *Correspondences* 1, no. 1 (2013): 5–33. In fact, Michael Moynihan, one of the co-editors of *TYR* and co-author of *Lords of Chaos* (2003), is the lead singer of Blood Axis, an American neo-folk band which espouses RT sentiment in its lyrics; certain volumes of *TYR* include sampler CDs with tracks from artists who share the journal’s mission.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Trafford and Aleks Pluskowski, “Antichrist Superstars: The Vikings in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal,” in *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David

there is a strong underpinning of the notion of hierarchy, kingship, hyper-masculinity, and the notion of “chosenness” among RT-minded Heathens, as well as an embrace of “personal spiritual paths.”<sup>40</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the systematic and exclusivist theology, egalitarianism, universality, and shepherd/flock-like structures of monotheistic Christianity (and Islam); such Pagan themes—as will be discussed below—are found in abundance in both *Vikings* and *Game of Thrones*.

While less overt in its politicization of contemporary Paganism, the relationship between the rather amorphous ideology of Celticism and contemporary Western Paganism bears some resemblance to Radical Traditionalism and northern contemporary paganism.<sup>41</sup> Celticism is “a place-based reaction to globalization and modernism,”<sup>42</sup> which is used to provide meaning to the lives of people who have Celtic ancestry or identify as “cardiac Celts,” i.e., feel themselves to be Celts regardless of genetics or place of birth.<sup>43</sup> It is not surprising then that Celticism has been mobilized for everything from devolution of political power in the United Kingdom to separatism in the American South and northern Italy to anti-immigration activism.<sup>44</sup> Alan M. Kent recounts J. R. R. Tolkien’s reference to Celticism as a “magic bag” into which “anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come.”<sup>45</sup> While

W. Marshall (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 67–69.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 115.

<sup>41</sup> Certain right-wing British nativists, who embrace Celtic and “Ancient Briton” Paganism and other forms of esoterica, have recently begun to employ the notion of “radical traditionalism” as a mechanism for attracting adherents; see Amy Hale, “John Michell, Radical Traditionalism, and the Emerging Politics of the Pagan New Right,” *Pomegranate* 13, no. 1 (2011): 77–97.

<sup>42</sup> Harvey et al., “Timing and Spacing Celtic Geographies,” 8.

<sup>43</sup> Bowman, “Cardiac Celts.”

<sup>44</sup> See, respectively, Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Dawn* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2002); Euan Hague, Benito Giordano, and Edward H. Sebesta, “Whiteness, Multiculturalism and Nationalist Appropriation of Celtic Culture: The Case of the League of the South and the Lega Nord,” *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 2 (2005): 151–73; and Michael Dietler, “Celticism, Celtitude, and Celticity: The Consumption of the Past in the Age of Globalization,” in *Celtes et Gaulois dans l’histoire, l’historiographie et l’idéologie moderne*, ed. Sabine Rieckhoff (Glux-en-Glenne: Centre Archéologique Européen, 2006), 237–48. It is important to note that while most adherents of RT align with some form of Neopaganism, many of those who embrace Celticism do not, and in some cases, Catholicism (or Anglicanism) forms an integral part of their identity; however, in this article, I focus on expressions of Celticism that embrace pre-Christian religious and civilizational orientations.

<sup>45</sup> Alan M. Kent, “Celtic Nirvanas: Constructions of Celtic in Contemporary British Youth

reinforcing the ideological polysemy of Celticism, this quote also points us to the fantastical fundament of Celtitude, an imaginary in which fairies, shape shifters, and magic reign, as well as a repository of myths associated with a besieged (white/indigenous) people tenuously clinging to the “Old Ways” at a geographic fringe, facing down the juggernaut of (Roman/Christian/British/global) “civilization” (a theme which is quite familiar to viewers of *Game of Thrones*).<sup>46</sup> Given such a pregnant nexus of ideas and imagery, it is not surprising that a host of folklorists, dramatists, and novelists have drawn inspiration from the mythical “Celts” over the past millennium,<sup>47</sup> not least of whom is George R. R. Martin.

Radical Traditionalism and Celticism are just two strains of the multifaceted and multivalent “culture-based, identitarian politics” of contemporary Paganism in Europe, the Americas, and the Antipodes;<sup>48</sup> however, they represent elements of the political spectrum which are quite distinct from the standard political orientations of “mainstream” Pagans, i.e., supportive of social justice, pluralism, multiculturalism, and globalism.<sup>49</sup> While most Pagans aver that their belief and practice represent an unveiling of lost knowledge, those who gravitate towards the sort of politicized contemporary Paganism associated with RT or Celticism tend to embrace what might be deemed European indigenism: a quasi-*völkisch*, spatially-privileged, ideological orientation that mimics the approach employed by indigenous movements in the Americas and Australia.<sup>50</sup> Whereas many Wiccans and Goddess Worshipers forge their identities in response to imagined persecution during the so-called “Burning Times,” i.e., the witch-mania of the Early Modern Period (though often expanded to the Middle Ages as well), those of the more *völkisch* bent construct their identities against the very implementation of monotheism in Europe. This

---

Culture,” in *Celtic Geographies: Old Cultures, New Times*, eds. David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 210.

<sup>46</sup> See Trafford and Pluskowski, “Antichrist Superstars.” Providing an interesting complement to Heathen Metal, the past 15 years has seen the rise of Celtic metal with strong pagan themes, with bands such as Primordial (Ireland) and Eluveitie (Switzerland) producing music with themes similar to that of the Nordic metal bands, though with the addition of pipes, fiddles, and tales of Celtic heroes and sacred nemetons.

<sup>47</sup> See Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> See Hale, “John Michell.”

<sup>49</sup> See Sarah M. Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> See Gardell, *Gods of the Blood* and Richard Borshay Lee, “Twenty-First Century Indigenism,” *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 4 (2006): 455–79.

results in condemning aspects of Christianity that many non-*völkisch* Pagans would embrace: renunciation of violence, unconditional love, human equality, etc.<sup>51</sup> For such Europhilic Pagans, the *Männerbund* ethos of *Vikings* and religiously-informed neo-orientalism *Game of Thrones* provides a validation of their rejection of what they see as the hypocritical moralism of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), going as far as to cast the “foreign” monotheists as duplicitous villains and their imported faith as alien, destructive, and socially debilitating. Furthermore, by providing a rich (non-traditional) religious fiction, these media products contribute to the invention of tradition among contemporary Pagans, allowing consumers of such popular culture to reify socio-cultural distinctions between themselves and the monotheistic masses.<sup>52</sup> Most disturbingly, the frequent and graphic violence depicted in such media can enflame “religio-ideological totalitarianism,” potentially predisposing practitioners to acts of aggression in the real world.<sup>53</sup>

### **“How Can You Be a Christian When You Walk among Our Gods?”: Religion in *Vikings***

Created and written by Michael Hirst, veteran of the historical dramas *Elizabeth* (1998) and *The Tudors* (2007–2010), The History Channel’s *Vikings* is a Canadian-Irish production that follows the rise of the eighth-century Norseman Ragnar Lothbrok (Travis Flammell). In Season One, the ambitious Ragnar, working in secret with his brother Rollo (Clive Standen) and the gifted shipwright Floki (Gustaf Skarsgård), leads a team of raiders across the North Sea to Britannia, despoiling Lindisfarne. Upon their return to Scandinavia with treasure and slaves, the rovers spark the ire of their myopic chieftain, Earl Haraldson (Gabriel Byrne). The earl claims their booty for himself, save one item: the Norse-speaking, Anglo-Saxon monk Athelstan (George Blagden), whom Ragnar captured in England. Ragnar’s wife, Lagertha (Katheryn Winnick), a

<sup>51</sup> An interesting academic parallel to the two popular-culture products discussed herein is Robert Kaplan’s post-9/11 treatise on the conduct of war, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (2002), which argues for a reevaluation of contemporary attitudes to war-making, proving a fillip to “radical traditionalist” approaches to conflict drawn from the history of the pagan Greece, Rome, Eurasia, and China.

<sup>52</sup> See Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Introduction,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 1–24.

<sup>53</sup> See James R. Lewis, *Violence and New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

renowned shield-maiden in her own right, accompanies the Vikings on their second, properly-sanctioned raid on England. Upon their return, Ragnar and Haraldson vie for power, with Ragnar defeating the earl in single combat. Following a pilgrimage to the holy city of Uppsala, Ragnar swears fealty to King Horik (Donal Logue), though his brother—who covets Lagertha—plots against him, allying with the dour Jarl Borg (Thorbjørn Harr) against the seemingly affable king.

Religion is a key component of nearly every episode, with much of the emotional drama hinging on questions of faith. As one reviewer framed it, “The Norse people’s religion [...] is presented not as window dressing but as a driving force in their decisions—the notion of Valhalla and dying a good death, for instance, is everywhere.”<sup>54</sup> In the opening scene of Episode 1 (“Rites of Passage”), Ragnar witnesses a grim Odin, the All-Father and supreme deity of Norse paganism, wandering a corpse-strewn battlefield in the eastern Baltic. He is accompanied by ghostly Valkyries descending to claim the souls of the heroic dead.<sup>55</sup> Communing with the unseen world is also introduced early on, with the clan’s disfigured *seiðmaðr* (‘seer’) accurately divining the future and Floki’s seemingly-truthful claim to be able to “look inside the trees” to find the right planks for his longship. In the second episode, “Wrath of the Northmen,” there is a recounting of the tale of *Jörmungandr*, the World Serpent, and his cataclysmic battle with the thunder god Thor. Later, on the westward sea passage, a storm threatens to sink the intrepid sailors. Rollo frets, “Thor is striking his anvil. He is angry with us. He wants to sink us.” However, Floki ventures a different interpretation of the divine intervention: “Thor is celebrating. He is showing he cannot sink this boat!” This religious egalitarianism is contrasted directly with an interspliced scene showing the authoritarian structures of faith at the Lindisfarne monastery, where the cenobites’ soon-to-be-realized fears are silenced by a dictatorial prelate. The fluidity of pagan belief and the essential role of individual interpretation are reinforced in Episode 3 (“The Dispossessed”), when Rollo and Ragnar debate about Valhalla and Ragnar tells his brother, “[y]ou have *your* Odin and I have *mine*.” A sharp contrast is also drawn between Christian and pagan belief in this episode as Ragnar

<sup>54</sup> James Poniewozik, “History Launches Vikings (and an Action-Packed Bible),” *Time*, 1 March 2013. <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/03/01/tv-weekend-history-launches-vikings-and-an-action-packed-bible/#ixzz2qxQ4hcZH>

<sup>55</sup> In sharp contrast to the armor-clad Asgardian superhero portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in *Thor* (2011), Odin appears in his “wanderer” guise looking like a disheveled pilgrim. Throughout the season, the viewer is regularly alerted to the god’s presence through the appearance of ravens, his traditional harbingers, including when Ragnar slays the earl.

questions his thrall Athelstan about his monastery's wealth: "Why does your god need silver and gold? He must be a greedy god like Loki."<sup>56</sup> The question goes unanswered, a particularly interesting development given that Athelstan is well-versed in Norse language and culture, having been trained as a missionary to the Scandinavian pagans.

In Episode 4 ("Trial"), the Vikings return to Northumbria, preying on church-goers in Hexam. Upon their return to Scandinavia,<sup>57</sup> Ragnar is charged with murdering the earl's half-brother. As his tribulations grow, Ragnar's faith in the gods, with whom he feels a personal kinship, grows stronger just as the earl begins to doubt their very existence. Over the next two episodes, the "priest" Athelstan grows closer to the pagan faith, intrigued by the depth of its theology and sincerity of his captors' adherence. Back in Northumbria in Episode 6 ("A King's Ransom"), we witness a "learned" bishop instructing the king that the Northmen have been sent by God to punish the Saxons for their "many sins and transgressions" as an even more superstitious nobleman is convinced they were sent by Satan. However, after the Vikings capture the king's brother in battle, the Christians are forced to treat with the invaders. King Aelle (Ivan Kaye) demands one Northman convert to Christianity to conduct the truce; Rollo unexpectedly volunteers but is sharply condemned by Floki, the most vituperative critic of the Saxons' faith, who chastises Rollo for renouncing his ancestral gods.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, Lagertha dispenses justice in Ragnar's stead, defusing a conflict over infidelity by instructing the clan that Heimdallr, revered guardian of the Bifröst Bridge, had taken the guise of a mortal and blessed a childless house with life. In Episode 7 ("Sacrifice"), in an effort to petition the deities for realization of the seer's prophecy that he will "father many sons" following Lagertha's recent miscarriage, Ragnar and his family (including the newly-freed Athelstan) embark on the ninth-year pilgrimage to the Temple at Uppsala

---

<sup>56</sup> Though a foster-brother of the All-Father, the god Loki (who was born a frost giant or *jötunn*) is generally reviled for his treachery, particularly following his role in the death of Odin's son, Baldr.

<sup>57</sup> There is little in the way of geographic specificity when it comes the location of "Kattegat," the main town in Season One. The mountainous setting portends Norway, but the name reflects either modern-day Denmark or Sweden.

<sup>58</sup> Floki, who regularly mocks Christianity, is incensed by the "conversion," however false it might be, refusing to take Ragnar's lead in kneeling at the service and instead spitting in the river in which Rollo (now Rolf) is baptized. When Aelle's troops violate the truce and attack, Rollo becomes a berserker, slaughtering the most "Christians" in a bloody retort to Floki's warning that Odin will never forgive him for what he has done.

(an event famously recounted in Adam of Bremen's eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*), where the Norsemen bask in "the living presence of the gods." Secretly, Ragnar hopes that Athelstan will offer himself as a willing sacrifice to the Æsir (Norse gods) he has seemingly embraced, but despite allowing his blood-baptism as a pagan, his heartfelt extolling of the praises of Thor, and his three-time denial of his Christianity to the high-priest of Uppsala, he refuses.<sup>59</sup> Instead, the sympathetic character Leif (Diarmaid Murtagh) volunteers, a poignant validation of the authenticity of the religiously-informed *Männerbund* of Ragnar's clique. In the final episode of the season, "All Change," Ragnar and company visit an ancient ash tree (reputed to be the World-Tree Yggdrasil) on a mission for Horik as the Seer reveals he is in danger from the "magical world."

From both a textual and visual standpoint, *Vikings*, with its unapologetic glorification of Norse paganism and bitter critique of Saxon Catholicism, is transgressive in its depiction of religion in medieval Europe. While there is no shortage of popular cultural products that condemn medieval Christianity,<sup>60</sup> there are precious few examples where paganism is positively contrasted with monotheism (particularly in cinematic or televisual media). Quite the contrary, pagans have long served as the "Other" in action films, destined to be vanquished by a godly/God-like knight in shining armor.<sup>61</sup> As film critic Ross Crawford points out, Hollywood depictions of medieval faith usually cast an atheistic (or anachronistically secular) protagonist, who works against the corrupting influences of religious hierarchies. However, Ragnar is genuine—even fervent—in his belief; accordingly, "*Vikings* challenges the viewer to engage with the theological context of both these cultures."<sup>62</sup> This engagement is particularly interesting when pagans and Christians are set in direct opposition, and the viewer is encouraged to identify with the former.

---

<sup>59</sup> Symbolically staging this transformation, we witness a Lindisfarne bible, kept in secret, fall apart in Athelstan's hands as he prepares to depart for Uppsala.

<sup>60</sup> Representative examples include *The Name of the Rose* (1980 [novel]/1986 [film]), *Pillars of the Earth* (1989 [novel]/2010 [television miniseries]), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

<sup>61</sup> See Richards, "From Christianity to Paganism." However, two comparatively recent films, *Valhalla Rising* (2009) and *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999), place monotheism and Norse paganism on relatively equal footing, with the former lambasting Christianity and paganism equally and the latter invoking a sort of anachronistic multiculturalism that value Islam and paganism equally.

<sup>62</sup> Ross Crawford, "Religion, Raids, and Ragnar(ök): Series One of 'Vikings,'" *Fickle Fascinations*, 5 May 2013. <http://ficklefascinations.com/2013/05/05/religion-raids-and-ragnarok-series-one-of-vikings/>

Employing media analysis and an ocular-centric perspective, Viking religious gatherings are shown in warm, welcoming colors and suggest mirth and camaraderie; for instance, the beauty with which Uppsala is filmed, purposefully represented as an Asgardian paradise, is nothing short of breathtaking. Christian religious functions meanwhile are gray, solemn, and cold. Actors portraying the Saxons are always pale, callow, and half-starved in appearance (except for the fat, sweaty, and decidedly villainous-looking Aelle); conversely, the Northmen are tanned, hale, and ever-confident. When it comes to sexuality, Athelstan's prudery is consistently framed as silly, particularly when he refuses numerous sexual overtures despite his apparent desire to participate (the symbolic "punishment" for sex outside of marriage so common in Hollywood media narratives is completely absent from *Vikings*).<sup>63</sup> From an ideological vantage, Christians—when invoking their faith—are presented as hypocritical, vainglorious, and vindictive: in one scene, King Aelle decries the Vikings as heathens and barbarians as he throws one of his loyal retainers into a pit of vipers, mocking him for his faith in the everlasting life granted by Jesus Christ. In opposition, pagans are depicted as genuine and modest. Breaking with a century of cinematic canon, Floki boldly profanes Christian sites and symbols, but is never punished for it (such violations of "moral" norms would, in previous filmic narratives, result in a violent and untimely death for the transgressor). Children even enter into the visual poetics of the show, as the Saxon king's timid and obviously overly-mothered son is contrasted with the boldness of Ragnar's boy Bjorn (Nathan O'Toole), shown taking care of the farm back in Scandinavia while the Saxon prince cowers at court. While not everything about paganism is presented positively in contrast to the Christian "Other" (particularly the troubling ease with which humans sacrifice themselves), reviews of the show recognize that the program does break from standard treatments of medieval faith.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> On gender and film, see Carrie Tarr and Brigitte Rollet, *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> Film scholar Harry Brown argues that the series effectively "sanitizes" the pagan ritual of human sacrifice, allowing Ragnar to "retain his sheen of heroism and generosity," making it something to celebrate rather than scorn: Harry Brown, "Plastic Pagans: Viking Human Sacrifice in Film and Television," in *Ethics and Medievalism: Studies in Medievalism XXIII*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 114.

## “The Seven Have Never Answered My Prayers, Perhaps the Old Gods Will”: Religion in *Game of Thrones*

Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, HBO’s *Game of Thrones* is a fantasy-based political thriller that centers on a clash of kings for control of the Iron Throne, which confers lordship over the island of Westeros. Based on co-executive producer George R. R. Martin’s multi-volume *A Song of Ice and Fire* (SIF) series, the primary focus is on the warring Stark and Lannister clans, but also includes important subplots featuring the Targaryens (the displaced line which once ruled the seven kingdoms of Westeros), House Greyjoy (rulers of the Hebrides-like Iron Islands), and the Night’s Watch (guardians of the Hadrianesque, 700-foot wall in the north that keeps the ungovernable Wildlings and undead “White Walkers” at bay), as well as a host of secondary characters. In Season One, Eddard Stark (Sean Bean) reluctantly agrees to become the primary advisor to King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), ultimately losing his head to the late Robert’s loathsome son, Joffrey (Jack Gleeson), the incestuous progeny of Queen Cersei (Lena Headey) and her brother Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau). Season Two hinges on the chaos created by warring pretenders to the throne: Joffrey, Robb Stark (Richard Madden), Renly Baratheon (Gethin Anthony), Stannis Baratheon (Stephen Dillane), and—from afar—Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke). Season Three sees Renly assassinated by a demon “squirmed from out [the] womb” of the Red Witch, Melisandra (Carice van Houten), the Ironborn declaring their independence from any king, and a northern war between the Wildlings and the Watch. Political intrigue comes to the fore with minor houses and entrepreneurial individuals like Jon Snow (Kit Harington), Petyr Balish (Aidan Gillen), and Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage) shaping the future of Westeros; the climax occurs when Robb is slaughtered by his own bannermen at his wedding.<sup>65</sup>

According to Martin, religion in *Game of Thrones* is “enormously important,”<sup>66</sup> despite the fact that some have criticized the series for giving short shrift to questions of faith, a central theme in the novels.<sup>67</sup> The faith that is completely indigenous to

<sup>65</sup> The King in the North and his bride are symbolically united through handfasting, a Pagan tradition popular in the British Isles, and one which as seen a sharp resurgence in recent decades; see Robert A. Saunders, “Pagan Places: Towards a Religiogeography of Neopaganism,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 7 (2013): 786–810.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with George R. R. Martin, *Game of Thrones - Season 2* [DVD]: Religions of Westeros, HBO (2012).

<sup>67</sup> See Daniel Mendelsohn, “The Women and the Thrones,” *New York Review of Books* 60, no. 17 (2013): 40–44. Interestingly, the word “religion” is not mentioned once in any of the five



Image 1. The Godswood of Winterfell. Used with permission.

Westeros is that of the Old Gods. Originally a form of animism practiced by the non-human Children of the Forest (non-humans akin to the *Sídhe* of Irish myth), the faith of the Old Gods was adopted by the First Men, human settlers from Essos. These humans established a form of worship that outwardly resembled Gaulish Druidic practices. In contemporary Westeros, the faith is still kept by those living in the north, including the Stark clan. Religious practice occurs outdoors, typically in a “godswood” where sacred weirwoods grow (see Image 1). This is evidenced in “Winter is Coming” (Season 1, Episode 1), which shows Ned Stark seeking forgiveness for taking the life of a deserting retainer beneath “trees with bark as white as bone and dark red leaves that look a thousand bloodstained hands.”<sup>68</sup> In the western coastal extremes, the “reaving and raping” Ironborn worship the Drowned God, an underwater deity, whose priests must be drowned and resuscitated to take their orders. These seafarers do not fear death by drowning as they believe they will enter a glorious submarine “heaven” of mermaids and other supernatural beings (somewhat analogous to the chthonic Otherworld of Celtic myth).

---

novels of the series.

<sup>68</sup> Robert J. Schwalb, *A Song of Ice & Fire RPG: A Game of Thrones Edition* (Seattle: Green Ronin Publishing, 2012), 24.

At the time of narrative, the dominant religion in Westeros is the Faith of the Seven, a comparatively recent import to island. This faith dates back some 6,000 years, arriving with the colonizing Andals, who destroyed many of the godswoods and carried out a near total genocide of the Children of the Forest. Supplanting the Old Gods in most of the country, the religion—symbolized by a seven-pointed star—venerates seven gods, Jungian archetypes of the so-called “One God.” The male gods are the Father, Warrior, and Smith; the female gods are the Crone, Mother, and Maiden (strongly reflecting the three aspects of the Triple Goddess of contemporary Wicca).<sup>69</sup> The seventh god is the faceless, deathly, ungendered Stranger. Like Catholicism, there is a hierarchical priesthood of *septons* (male) and *septas* (female), as well as several orders of monks and nuns, and a litany of prescripts to follow (Ned Stark, the unrepentant animist, blithely remarks to his southron wife about the gods of the Faith: “It’s your gods with all the rules”).<sup>70</sup> Relations between the northern and southern faiths are comparatively amiable, as evidenced by the intermarriage of the Old Gods-worshipping Starks with the Seven-observant Tullys, and the predilection of knights to swear oaths on both the “old gods and new.”

The Faith of the Lord of Light, a “vaguely Semitic” belief system with “furious moral absolutism,”<sup>71</sup> possesses a small (but growing) number of followers in Westeros, although it is a common faith on the super-continent of Essos. Its deity, R’hllor (pejoratively known on Westeros as the “Red God”), is the god of heat, light, and life; he is opposed by the Great Other, “the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror.” The religion is rooted in ecstatic visions, miracles, and a fear of the night, with a messianic prophecy that a great hero will return bearing a flaming sword. The zealot Melisandre of Asshai (the Red Witch) from the “exotic East,”<sup>72</sup> advisor and priestess to one of the claimants of the Iron Throne, Stannis, is mostly closely associated with the faith in the series.<sup>73</sup> She uses her shadow-binding witch-

---

<sup>69</sup> See Fry, “The Goddess Ascending.”

<sup>70</sup> In the novels, there is also the so-called Faith Militant, a Jesuit-like order of priest-soldiers who were disbanded when they posed a threat to temporal rulers (though they reform during the chaotic “clash of kings”).

<sup>71</sup> Mendelsohn, “The Women and the Thrones,” 43.

<sup>72</sup> Mendelsohn, “The Women and the Thrones,” 40.

<sup>73</sup> There is an interesting role reversal in the casting of *Game of Thrones*, given that Sean Bean and Carice van Houten both appeared in the medieval pagan-themed *Black Death* (2010). Van Houten’s character Langiva, a purported witch with power to raise the dead and ward off bubonic plague, attempts to defend polytheism and traditional European folk practices against (male-chauvinist) Christianization, embodied in the crusading knight Ulric (Bean). Ultimate-

craft to kill from a distance, ultimately turning Stannis into a “radical devotee” of her religion, part of a larger calculated effort to convert all of Westeros through hierarchical diffusion.<sup>74</sup>

Such obvious engagement with religious themes is what principally separates *Game of Thrones*/SIF from *Lord of the Rings*, despite the frequent comparisons between the two epics. According to one commentator, “the deep, Christianizing sentimentality of the world-view expressed in *Lord of the Rings* is foreign to Martin,”<sup>75</sup> while Martin (a lapsed Catholic) has pointedly critiqued the (fervent) Tolkien for sidestepping a discussion of religion in his epic series: “[T]here’s no priesthood, there’s no temples; nobody is worshiping anything in Rings.”<sup>76</sup> However, both of these authors can be seen as sketching “moral cartographies” through their narratives.<sup>77</sup> Tolkien presents a Manichean world where Western/Christian values win the day against threats emanating from the barbarous oriental periphery;<sup>78</sup> while Martin’s imagined realm lacks such moral absolutes, it likewise presents existential threats that emanate from eastern realms. By linking the besieged peoples of Britannia-like Westeros to polytheism and indigenism, however, *Game of Thrones* presents a text which cannot be read as pro-Christian, or even friendly to monotheism.

In a pivotal moment during “The North Remembers” (Season 2, Episode 1), Melisandre demands that Stannis burn the sacred wooden idols of the Seven, therein symbolically severing his subjects’ links to their Westerosi faith (see Image 2); Melisandre intones:

We offer you these false gods. Take them and cast your light upon us for the night is dark and full of terrors. After the long summer, darkness will fall heavy on the world. Stars will bleed. The cold breath of winter will freeze the seas and the dead shall rise in the north.<sup>79</sup>

---

ly, Ulric is sacrificed as a martyr for his Christian beliefs and Langiva is exposed as a charlatan (triggering a wave of witch-burning). The film’s predictable, pro-Christian plot is remarkable only in its stark contrast with *Game of Thrones*.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Zimmerman Jones, “Of Direwolves and Gods,” in *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. James Lowder (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2012), 116.

<sup>75</sup> Mendelsohn, “The Women and the Thrones,” 43.

<sup>76</sup> Martin quoted in James Hibberd, “EW Interview: George R. R. Martin Talks ‘A Dance With Dragons.’” *Entertainment Weekly*, 12 July 2011, accessed 7 February 2014. <http://shelf-life.ew.com/2011/07/12/george-martin-talks-a-dance-with-dragons/>

<sup>77</sup> See Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

<sup>78</sup> See Margaret Sinex, “‘Monsterized Saracens,’ Tolkien’s Haradrim, and Other Medieval ‘Fantasy Products,’” *Tolkien Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 175–96.

<sup>79</sup> The Red Priestess plays on current events in the narrative, obliquely referring to a red

Seeing the desecration of the Faith's idols, the head priest of Dragonstone, Stannis' keep, challenges those gathered: "All you men were named in the light of the Seven? Is this how you treat the gods of your fathers? Are you so eager to spit on your ancestors?"<sup>80</sup> However, it is too late. Like the Saxon pagans whose axis mundi, the Irminsul, was so easily felled by Charlemagne because their gods failed them,<sup>81</sup> so too do the Seven burn and so shall these souls be forced to adopt the new faith.

Such ethnicized treatments of faith resound throughout *Game of Thrones*, and even more so in its source material, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The narrative puts forth a strong critique of the "oriental" nature of Melisandre's faith, while simultaneously linking it to the darker forces of the universe including blood sacrifices and demons. The connection to Abrahamic monotheism is consistently reinforced: this universalist, proselytizing religion of the "East" arrives in Westeros with the sword, seeking to banish all other systems of belief. In her analysis of the Charlemagne-Saxon conflict, religious studies scholar Carole Cusack seems to be channeling *Game of Thrones* when she states, "Monotheism is in essence universalizing and intolerant, where polytheism is local and pluralistically legitimate. When monotheism encounters pluralist beliefs, its instinctual tendency is deem the 'wrong' and to eradicate them."<sup>82</sup> Likewise, followers of R'hllor (the Lord of Light) are described as "instruments" rather than "agents," reflecting the pastor-shepherd dynamic of Levantine religions in opposition to the believer-centric theology of contemporary Paganism. Reflecting radical Christian theology, Melisandre, in the highly-promoted HBO trailer for Season Four, intones, "[t]here is only one hell—the one we live in now." While this statement may seem appropriate given the bloody chaos generated by the "clash of kings," it should not be dismissed so easily in the context in which it is delivered. Like many evangelical Christians, the Red God's faithful seek an end to suffering in this life, an outcome that can only be brought about with the end of the world.

Adding to the allegory, the unflinching righteousness of the Red Faith,

---

comet that has filled the sky as well as reports that Westeros's multiyear summer has come to an end, signaling the beginning of an unpredictable period of winter, as well as reports of undead White Walkers.

<sup>80</sup> Shortly thereafter, the septon attempts to murder Melisandre by drinking from a poisoned chalice from which he has just taken a draught, but fails as she transmutes the toxin and he dies horribly, further proving her otherworldly powers.

<sup>81</sup> See Carole Cusack, "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission: 'Indigenous' Religion and 'World' Religion in the Early Middle Ages," *Pomegranate* 13, no. 1 (2011): 33–51.

<sup>82</sup> Cusack, "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission," 42.



Image 2. The Burning of the Seven at Dragonstone. Used with permission.

which treats all other beliefs as false and their gods as abominations, evokes parallels with both Christianity and Islam. Conversely, as the story unfolds, the reader/viewer learns more about the allure of the inherently “local,” earth-bound faith of the Old Gods, a fact reinforced by the southron Sam Tarly’s (John Bradley) “conversion” from the Seven to the Old Gods upon joining the Night’s Watch and coming face-to-face with the horrors of the arctic northern reaches. *Game of Thrones* frames this as right and proper, allowing Sam, the seemingly-doomed, corpulent bookworm from the south, to be transformed into an unlikely hero in the north. As the books progress, Martin reveals that the Old Gods watch with “a thousand unseen eyes” and the Children of the Forest are real, not mythical creatures. There is also an inherent condemnation of abandoning autochthonous practices, when the author informs us that the “old gods have no power in the south” due to the felling of the sacred weirwoods millennia ago. Taken collectively, there are powerful lessons to be learned here, not least of which are that the “Old Ways are best” and to “beware of ideas (and people) from foreign shores.” While Christian thinker David Lose’s assertion that “Martin’s universe yields no unambiguous path

to salvation from religion,”<sup>83</sup> it is quite clear that the monotheism of the Red God is to be foresworn.

### **Pop-Culture Europhilic Polytheism, Mediatization of Religion, and Identity Politics**

Contemporary Western Paganism is a vibrant, meaningful, and increasingly accepted belief system in Europe, North America, and the Antipodes. Seen by many as an “indigenous revitalization movement,”<sup>84</sup> certain Pagan paths are embracing identity politics at the local, national, and even global level in an effort to gain greater recognition of the validity of their religion and achieve protections under the law currently afforded other sectarian groups.<sup>85</sup> Concurrently, Pagans engage with a variety of cultural products associated with the (re-)invention of lost traditions and practices, with popular culture being a particularly fecund area for such actions. However, Pagans are far from alone in using media products for such ends, especially those which might be deemed occult. In the words of Christopher Partridge, “[t]he late modern age since the 1960s has witnessed the emergence of a political and cultural context that has proved particularly conducive to the proliferation of broadly esoteric ideas.”<sup>86</sup> It is readily apparent that “fantasy entertainment—fiction, television, movies, games—has moved ever closer to the center of mass culture over the past couple of decades,”<sup>87</sup> while scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of popular culture in shaping religious beliefs and functioning as a medium of dissemination for a variety of non-orthodox spiritual ideas.<sup>88</sup> Visual media is particularly evocative as Paganism scholar Adrian Ivakhiv argues:

Visual images can move us in this way not because they harbor a mysterious power over us, but because, through carrying and condensing meanings in forms that involve us emotionally, they mobilize a power that is already ours [...] in this

---

<sup>83</sup> David Lose, “The Gospel According to ‘Game of Thrones,’” *Huffington Post*, 6 June 2013, accessed 8 February 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/the-gospel-according-to-game-of-thrones\\_b\\_3395995.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/the-gospel-according-to-game-of-thrones_b_3395995.html)

<sup>84</sup> Cusack, “Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne’s Mission,” 47.

<sup>85</sup> See Saunders, “Pagan Places.”

<sup>86</sup> Christopher Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary,” paper presented at the First International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism, Stockholm University, 27–29 August 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Mendelsohn, “The Women and the Thrones,” 42.

<sup>88</sup> See Asprem, and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms.”

sense, [visual media are] a form of world-production, but the worlds so produced are neither identical to the world that preceded them nor completely different from it.<sup>89</sup>

There is a particular allure to media products associated with the violent, pagan Dark Ages and the incumbent “role models and value systems” associated with the period.<sup>90</sup> Easily conflated with magic and fantastical creatures, the genre lends itself to those seeking to reinvent the past by establishing new cultural traditions. This is particularly true among those who have rejected not only globalism, but also nationalism, seeing the latter as a Trojan horse for the former given the current trends towards neoliberalism and multiculturalism. Instead, a neo-tribalist model for the creation of new (yet convincingly *authentic*) community is sought. This ideology is particularly strong among certain quarters of Europe’s radical right, including many contemporary Pagans from the Heathen and Celticist paths. According to Jacob Christiansen Senholt, “[t]he radical right unanimously, in one form or another, see European pre-Christian traditions as the only real and credible alternative to Christianity and as a form of spirituality that both acts as a bulwark against the ‘onslaught of modernity’ and at the same time is fulfilling tradition in line with basic European values.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore, when popular culture depicts European native traditions<sup>92</sup> in a positive light vis-à-vis (imported) monotheism(s), it is an important development, since media is a perpetual construction site of identity, serving both as a mirror and a forge.<sup>93</sup>

If religion in popular culture is a “reflection” of religion in our own world,<sup>94</sup> and given that many young (and not-so-young) people are looking for new areas of thought and expression, then it is not surprising that “popular culture animates” interest in alternative faiths and identities.<sup>95</sup> An exemplar of this phenomenon is Ale Glad’s post on the site “An Ásatrú Blog: Exploring the

<sup>89</sup> Ivakhiv, “Cinema of the Not-Yet,” 191–92.

<sup>90</sup> Richards, “From Christianity to Paganism,” 213.

<sup>91</sup> Jacob Christiansen Senholt, “Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse within the Radical Right,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 256.

<sup>92</sup> See Prudence Jones, “The European Native Tradition,” in *Nature Religion Today Paganism in the Modern World*, eds. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 77–88.

<sup>93</sup> Kennet Granholm, “The Secular, the Post-Secular, and the Esoteric in the Public Sphere,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 309–29.

<sup>94</sup> Zimmerman Jones, “Of Direwolves and Gods,” 108.

<sup>95</sup> Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary.”

Northern Troth.”<sup>96</sup> The aforementioned sacrifice of Leif (*Vikings*, Season 1, Episode 7) prompted the author to write a substantive, historical analysis of the concept of “worth,” lambasting its current meaning as a “synonym for financial value.” The author goes on to make a “speculative” assessment of who in society would represent a greater boon as the sacrifice’s “lifeblood would sustain the community in the same way as the lifeblood of any animal.” Ultimately, the author completes his thought-experiment in a thankful manner to the show’s creators for “shedding light on an ancient custom that we just don’t understand today.” As an Ásatrúar, or North Germanic Pagan, Glad employs the mediated world of *Vikings* as part of his larger declared project to “help rebuild our faith.”<sup>97</sup>

Blogs are a common form of religious expression for contemporary Pagans, as well as a popular zone for fellowship, allowing them to espouse their own ideologies and commune with like-minded individuals. While posted prior to the premiere of *Vikings*, Ásatrúar Glenn Bergen lauds the deeds of the real-life Ragnar Lodbrok, stating, “I honor him on both March 28th, and on whatever date Easter actually falls on in a given year. Two digs at the Christians are always better than one, and Ragnar’s exploits I feel warrant it. All Hail, Ragnar Lodbrok!”<sup>98</sup> Given the extant interest in this famous Northman among Heathens, it is not surprising that the community has whole-heartedly adopted *Vikings*. What is more interesting is how those open to other spiritual paths view the narrative, something that creator Michael Hirst had in mind during filming. In an interview, he noted that “[a]s the season goes on, you understand where the gods came from, you understand the attraction of the pagan worldview and the pagan gods. It’s interesting for, let’s say, a North American, largely Christian audience for the first time to be presented the pagan worldview that they overthrew, that they replaced, and what it meant.”<sup>99</sup> As Hirst suggests, his show attempts to challenge accepted notions about faith in the European historical context, visually reifying what historian Michael Strmiska, writing on the

---

<sup>96</sup> Ale Glad, “Human Sacrifice on History’s Vikings,” *An Ásatrú Blog: Exploring the Northern Troth*, 22 April 2013, accessed 8 February 2014. <http://www.asatrublog.com/2013/04/22/human-sacrifice-on-historys-vikings/>

<sup>97</sup> Glad, “Human Sacrifice on History’s Vikings.”

<sup>98</sup> Glenn Bergen, “Ragnar Lodbrok : History and Legend,” *A Follower of the Old Ways*. 27 March 2011, accessed 7 February 2014. <http://www.anindependentasatru.com/-blog/ragnar-lodbrok-history-and-legend>

<sup>99</sup> Hirst quoted in Stacey Harrison, “Vikings’ Get an Epic 9-Part History Channel Makeover,” *Zap2It*, 3 March 2013, accessed 7 February 2014. <http://blog.zap2it.com/frominside-thebox/2013/03/vikings-get-an-epic-9-part-history-channel-makeover.html>

“recovered history” of medieval paganism, labels the “deflation of the grand narrative of Christian supremacy” and confuting the “notion that European civilization is one and the same as European Christianity.”<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, the series breaks down, even reverses, the “imaginal construct” of the pagan as Other.<sup>101</sup> Through allegory, *Game of Thrones* does likewise, but adds an orientalist patina to the discussion, making some of these critiques even more pointed.

The question of religion in *Game of Thrones* as an exposition on contemporary European polytheism/Paganism sparked a lively debate on the popular pagan forum *The Cauldron* (<http://ecauldron.com/>).<sup>102</sup> Throughout the blog entitled “Religion in Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire,”<sup>103</sup> contributors identify parallels between their own (mostly Wicca-Celtic Reconstructionist) faith and the practices and beliefs associated with the Old Gods and the Seven, while almost unanimously recognizing the Faith of the Lord of Light as Christianity.<sup>104</sup> Several of the bloggers either reported experiences of enthusiasts attempting to replicate the practices of the followers of the Seven or the Old Gods, or predicted that Martin’s fabricated faiths would soon follow Jediism, becoming “real world” (albeit invented) religions.<sup>105</sup> In an interesting exchange, Riothamus12 asks stephyjh,

Do you model your life and philosophy after movies? Religion isn’t just some convention you show up to dressed like your favorite character from Lord of The Rings or Dune. Even if you don’t subscribe to that point of view, if you got Harry Potter jokes directed at you just for being pagan and believing in magick it might sour your attitude (26 Aug 2013 03:10 AM).

To which, Morag responds, “Yes. TV shows, too. So say we all” (26 Aug 2013 03:20

<sup>100</sup> Michael Strmiska, “The Evils of Christianization,” in *Cultural Expressions of Evil and Wick- edness: Wrath, Sex, Crime*, ed. Terrie Waddell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 67.

<sup>101</sup> See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>102</sup> On another blog, “Dorian the Historian” (2013), has crafted an intricate rendering of *Game of Thrones*/SIF as Ragnarök, suggesting how each character represents some aspect of the mythical Norse apocalypse, prompting an explosion of responses from readers who see the narrative as instructive of how to live at the end of time.

<sup>103</sup> Carnelian, “Religion in Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire,” *The Cauldron: A Pagan Forum*, 19 July 2013, accessed 7 February 2014. <http://www.ecauldron.com/forum/show-thread.php?7344-Religion-in-Game-of-Thrones-A-Song-of-Ice-and-Fire>

<sup>104</sup> For a description of the Reconstructionist Paganism, see Michael Strmiska, “Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives,” in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 1–54.

<sup>105</sup> See, for instance, Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

AM). Riothamus12 retorts,

To me it says one treats such things as mere entertainment a.k.a. the convention analogy. That is something I don't like anyone doing. I don't worship my Gods to entertain myself I do it because I seek the truth, because I seek wisdom, because I want to do that which is right, and because I want to thank them for what they have already done to guide me. Their rites and them (sic) are to be treated with respect. I find joy in my reverence, but it is a greater joy. I treat these things with the seriousness they deserve (26 Aug 2013 03:49 AM).

Jack, who prompted the debate, chimes in, “That you still think that says to me that you aren't actually listening to what people are saying. It isn't that religion is entertainment. It's that entertainment can inform religion” (26 Aug 2013 03:56 AM), calmly reflecting the idea that film, television, and other visual media represent a “semiotic landscape [...] a human-made, cultural construct of systematically related signs and sign systems.”<sup>106</sup> A flurry of follow-up responses were dedicated to users sharing and sourcing the religious and philosophical fundaments to which they adhere, including Pagan-friendly axioms from *Dune*, *Babylon 5* (1993–1998), and *Gladiator* (2000).

As many viewers and critics have suggested, *Game of Thrones*, with its glorification of “indigenous” (read European) paganism against “Eastern” (read Middle Eastern) monotheism thus shares a great deal with the successful reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009). The new *Battlestar Galactica* addressed religious themes by pitting space-travelling humans, who practice a diasporic form of Græco-Roman paganism, against genocidal androids who are “devoutly monotheistic and deeply unforgiving of alternative beliefs.”<sup>107</sup> The timing and political content of the series resulted in reviewer/audience framing of the biomechanical Cylons as al Qaeda “stand-ins,”<sup>108</sup> thus—by default—making the humans equivalents of denizens of the European(ized) “West.” If this reading is employed, *Battlestar Galactica* can be seen as similarly promoting Paganism against the homogenizing (or in the case of *Battlestar*

<sup>106</sup> Jeff Hopkins, “A Mapping of Cinematic Place: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis)representation,” in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*, eds. Stuart Aitken and Leo E. Zonn (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 47.

<sup>107</sup> Lynnette R. Porter, David Lavery, and Hillary Robson, *Finding Battlestar Galactica: An Unauthorized Guide* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2008), 235.

<sup>108</sup> Iver B. Neumann, “‘Religion in the Global Sense’: The Relevance of Religious Practices for Political Community in *Battlestar Galactica* and Beyond,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (2011): 387–401.

*Galactica*, genocidal) force of monotheism. While it may be that the Europhilic polytheism theme in popular culture proves fleeting, *Vikings* and *Game of Thrones* are not the only examples of the trend. Building as it does on the “teen-witch craze” of the 1990s, this shift towards adult manifestations of Western esotericism and the occult seems—in hindsight—somewhat predictable when correlated with shifting generational tastes associated with music and other forms of popular culture.<sup>109</sup> Reflecting current shifts in culture overall, such developments are not trivial given the increasing use of mass media as pliable tool for inventing traditions.

In addition to providing a critical examination of the political and religious content in the highly successful television series *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*, this article has attempted to demonstrate that popular-cultural treatments of European polytheism (Paganism) are shifting. Once unthinkable in Hollywood, pagans are now emerging as heroes in narratives which pit them against monotheistic adversaries, who range from villainous (Aelle) to diabolical (Melisandre) to annihilationist (Cylons). I have argued that there are a number of reasons for this transformation: cultural trends associated with primitivist backlash and/or Europhilic identity that afford market space to such new narrative directions; growing interest in non-orthodox spirituality (including contemporary Paganism) among the generation born after 1968; and the rising importance of popular culture and new media as zones for the transmission of heterodox religious ideas.

## References

### Television Series

- Babylon 5: Seasons 1–5*. 1993–1998. Created by J. Michael Straczynski. WB Television Network. 110 episodes.
- Battlestar Galactica: Seasons 1–4*. 2003–2009. Developed by Ronald D. Moore. Sci-Fi Channel. 75 episodes.
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Seasons 1–7*. 1997–2003. Created by Joss Whedon. WB Television Network. 144 episodes.
- Charmed: Seasons 1–8*. 1998–2006. Created by Constance M. Burge. WB Television Network. 178 episodes.
- Game of Thrones: Seasons 1–3*. 2011–2013. Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. HBO. 30 episodes.
- Pillars of the Earth*. 2010. Directed by Sergio Mimica-Gezzan. Starz. 8 episodes.
- Vikings: Season 1*. 2013. Created by Michael Hirst. History. 9 episodes.

---

<sup>109</sup> See Granholm, “Ritual Black Metal.”

## Motion Pictures/Theatre

- 13th Warrior, The*. 1999. Directed by John McTiernan. Burbank: Buena Vista Pictures. 103 min.
- Black Death*. 2010. Directed by Christopher Smith. London: Revolver Entertainment. 97 min.
- Craft, The*. 1996. Directed by Andrew Fleming. Culver City: Columbia Pictures. 101 min.
- Gladiator*. 2000. Directed by Ridley Scott. Universal City: DreamWorks Pictures. 155 min.
- Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*. 1968. Music by Galt MacDermot. Lyrics by James Rado and Gerome Ragni.
- Harry Potter: Complete 8-Film Collection*. 2011. Directed by Chris Columbus (1–2), Alfonso Cuarón (3), Mike Newell (4), and David Yates (5–8). Burbank: Warner Bros. 1179 min.
- Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey, The*. 2012. Directed by Peter Jackson. Burbank: Warner Bros. 169 min.
- Kingdom of Heaven*. 2005. Directed by Ridley Scott. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox. 144 min.
- Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy*. 2012. Directed by Peter Jackson. Los Angeles: New Line Cinema. 681 min.
- Thor*. 2011. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures. 114 min.
- Twilight Forever: The Complete Saga Box Set*. 2013. Directed by Catherine Hardwicke (1), Chris Weitz (2), David Slade (3) and Bill Condon (4–5). Universal City: Summit Entertainment. 598 min.
- Valhalla Rising*. 2009. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. Copenhagen: Scanbox Entertainment. 103 min.
- Wicker Man, The*. 1973. Directed by Robin Hardy. London: British Lion Films. 87 min.

## Sources

- Aitamurto, Kaarina. “Modern Pagan Warriors: Violence and Justice in Rodnoverie.” In *Violence and New Religious Movements*, edited by James R. Lewis, 231–48. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Aitamurto, Kaarina, and Scott Simpson. *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*. Abingdon: Acumen, 2013.
- Asprem, Egil. “Heathens up North: Politics, Polemics, and Contemporary Norse Paganism in Norway.” *Pomegranate* 10, no. 1 (2008): 41–69.
- Asprem, Egil, and Kennet Granholm. “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition.” In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 25–48. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- . “Introduction.” In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 1–24. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge and Boston: Polity, 2000.
- Bergen, Glenn. “Ragnar Lodbrok : History and Legend.” In *A Follower of the Old Ways*. 27 March 2011. Accessed 7 February 2014. <http://www.anindependentasatru.com/-blog/ragnar-lodbrok-history-and-legend>
- Berger, Helen A., and Douglas Ezzy. “Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 501–14.
- Bernauer, Lauren. “Modern Germanic Heathenry and Radical Traditionalists.” In *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, edited by Frances Di Lauro, 265–74. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2006.
- Berresford Ellis, Peter. *Celtic Dawn*. Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2002.

- Bittarello, Maria Beatrice. "Shifting Realities? Changing Concepts of Religion and the Body in Popular Culture and Neopaganism." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 2 (2008): 215–32.
- Bostridge, Ian. *Witchcraft and Its Transformations: C.1650 – C.1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Bowman, Marion. "Cardiac Celts: Images of the Celts in Paganism." In *Paganism Today*, edited by Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey, 242–51. London: Thorsons, 1996.
- Brown, Harry. "Plastic Pagans: Viking Human Sacrifice in Film and Television." In *Ethics and Medievalism: Studies in Medievalism XXIII*, edited by Karl Fugelso, 107–21. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014.
- Buckley, Joshua, and Michael Moynihan. "Editorial Preface." *TYR: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 2 (2004): 7–10.
- . "What Does It Mean to Be a Radical Traditionalist?." *TYR: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 1 (2002): back cover.
- Carnelian. "Religion in Game of Thrones/a Song of Ice and Fire." *The Cauldron: A Pagan Forum*. 19 July 2013. Accessed 7 February 2014. <http://www.ecauldron.com/forum/show-thread.php?7344-Religion-in-Game-of-Thrones-A-Song-of-Ice-and-Fire>
- Cheaney, J. B. "Among the Pagans: Percy Jackson and the Olympians." *Redeemed Reader*. 15 March 2011. Accessed 7 February 2014. <http://www.redeemedreader.com/2011/03/among-the-pagans-percy-jackson-and-the-olympians/>
- Chirot, Daniel. "A Clash of Civilizations or of Paradigms?: Theorizing Progress and Social Change." *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001): 341–62.
- Christiansen Senholt, Jacob. "Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse within the Radical Right." In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 244–64. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- Cleary, Collin. "Knowing the Gods." *TYR: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 1 (2002): 23–40.
- Clifton, Chas S. *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America*. Lanham and Oxford: Rowman Altamira, 2006.
- Crawford, Ross. "Religion, Raids, and Ragnar(Ök): Series One of 'Vikings?'" *Fickle Fascinations*. 5 May 2013. <http://ficklefascinations.com/2013/05/05/religion-raids-and-ragnarok-series-one-of-vikings/>
- Cubitt, Sean. "The Supernatural in Neo-Baroque Hollywood." In *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, edited by Warren Buckland, 47–65. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Cumbey, Constance. *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism*. Lafayette: Huntington House, 1983.
- Curry, Patrick. *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.
- Cusack, Carole M. *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.
- . "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission: 'Indigenous' Religion and 'World' Religion in the Early Middle Ages." *Pomegranate* 13, no. 1 (2011): 33–51.
- Dawson, Lorne L. "Anti-Modernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism: Struggling with the Cultural Significance of New Religious Movements." *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1998): 131–58.
- de Benoist, Alain. *On Being a Pagan*. Translated by Jon Graham. Atlanta: Ultra, 2005.
- Dietler, Michael. "Celticism, Celtitude, and Celticity: The Consumption of the Past in the Age

- of Globalization.” In *Celtes Et Gaulois Dans L’histoire, L’historiographie Et L’idéologie Moderne*, edited by Sabine Rieckhoff, 237–48. Glux-en-Glenne: Centre Archéologique Européen, 2006.
- Dittmer, Jason. “The Geographical Pivot of (the End of) History: Evangelical Geopolitical Imaginations and Audience Interpretation of *Left Behind*.” *Political Geography* 27, no. 3 (2008): 280–300.
- Dobratz, Betty A. “The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racialist Movement.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2 (2001): 287–301.
- Ellis, Bill. *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.
- Fox, Kate. *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. Boston and London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008.
- Frankfurter, David. “The Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic as Religious-Studies Data.” *Numen* 50, no. 1 (2003): 108–17.
- Franks, Benjamin, Stephen Harper, Jonathan Murray, and Gary Carpenter, eds. *The Quest for the Wicker Man: History, Folklore and Pagan Perspectives*. Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2007.
- Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*. New York and London: Macmillan, 1890.
- Fry, Carrol L. “The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marian Zimmer Bradley’s Novels.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (1993): 67–80.
- Gemmill, Maia A., and Daniel H. Nexon. “Children’s Crusade: The Religious Politics of Harry Potter.” In *Harry Potter and International Relations*, edited by Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, 79–101. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Gibson, Marion. *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Glad, Ale. “Human Sacrifice on History’s Vikings.” *An Ásatrú Blog: Exploring the Northern Troth*. 22 April 2013. Accessed February 8 2014. <http://www.asatrublog.com/2013/04/22/human-sacrifice-on-historys-vikings/>
- Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology*. London: I. B. Tauris, 1992.
- Granholt, Kennet. “Ritual Black Metal: Popular Music as Occult Mediation and Practice.” *Correspondences* 1, no. 1 (2013): 5–33.
- . “The Secular, the Post-Secular, and the Esoteric in the Public Sphere.” In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholt, 309–29. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- . “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’: Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music.” *Numen* 58, no. 4 (2011): 514–44.
- Hague, Euan, Benito Giordano, and Edward H. Sebesta. “Whiteness, Multiculturalism and Nationalist Appropriation of Celtic Culture: The Case of the League of the South and the Lega Nord.” *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 2 (2005): 151–73.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Harrington, Roberta. “Fundamentalists in a Frenzy over Power of the Occult.” *Sunday Herald*, 17 October 1999.
- Harrison, Stacey. “Vikings’ Get an Epic 9-Part History Channel Makeover.” *Zap2It*. 3 March 2013. Accessed 7 February 2014. <http://blog.zap2it.com/frominsidethebox/2013/03/vi->

[kings-get-an-epic-9-part-history-channel-makeover.html](#)

- Harvey, David C., Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy, and Christine Milligan. "Timing and Spacing Celtic Geographies." In *Celtic Geographies: Old Cultures, New Times*, edited by David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan, 1–17. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Harvey, Graham. *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- Hendershot, Cynthia. *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination*. Madison: Popular Press, 2001.
- Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965.
- Hibberd, James. "Ew Interview: George R. R. Martin Talks 'a Dance with Dragons'." *Entertainment Weekly*. 12 July 2011. Accessed 7 February 2014. <http://shelf-life.ew.com/2011/07/12/george-martin-talks-a-dance-with-dragons/>
- Historian, Dorian the. "Game of Thrones & Norse Mythology." *Ragnarök - The Song of Ice & Fire*. 5 May 2013. Accessed 7 February 2014. <http://gameofthronesandnorsemythology.blogspot.com/2013/05/ragnarok-song-of-ice-fire.html>
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. "Introduction: Inventing Traditions." In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 1–13. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Hopkins, Jeff. "A Mapping of Cinematic Place: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis)Representation." In *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*, edited by Stuart Aitken and Leo E. Zonn, 47–66. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994.
- Hughes, Sarah. "Sopranos Meets Middle-Earth: How *Game of Thrones* Took over Our World." *The Guardian*. 22 March 2014. Accessed 10 November 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/mar/22/game-of-thrones-whats-not-to-love>
- Hume, Stephen. "Fantasy Casts Welcome Spell in Age of Uncertainty." *Vancouver Sun*, 9 November 2001.
- Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Ivakhiv, Adrian. "Cinema of the Not-Yet: The Utopian Promise of Film as Heterotopia." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5, no. 2 (2011): 186–209.
- Jennings, Peter. *Pagan Paths: A Guide to Wicca, Druidry, Asatru, Shamanism and Other Pagan Practices*. New York: Random House, 2008.
- Johnston, Hannah E., and Peg Aloi, eds. *New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007.
- Jones, Prudence. "The European Native Tradition." In *Nature Religion Today Paganism in the Modern World*, edited by Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts and Geoffrey Samuel, 77–88. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- Kaplan, Robert D. *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. New York: Random House, 2002.
- Kent, Alan M. "Celtic Nirvanas: Constructions of Celtic in Contemporary British Youth Culture." In *Celtic Geographies: Old Cultures, New Times*, edited by David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan, 208–27. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Koven, Mikel J. "The Folklore Fallacy. A Folkloristic/Filmic Perspective on *The Wicker Man*." *Fabula* 48, no. 3–4 (2007): 270–80.

- Kyle, Richard. "The Occult Roars Back: Its Modern Resurgence." *Direction* 29, no. 2 (2000): 91–99.
- LaHaye, Tim. *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995.
- Larson, Bob. *Larson's Book of Spiritual Warfare*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999.
- Laruelle, Marlène. "Alternative Identity, Alternative Religion? Neo-Paganism and the Aryan Myth in Contemporary Russia." *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2008): 283–301.
- Lavine, Marc. "Opponents Warn of Satanic Plot as Harry Potter Hoopla Snowballs." *Agence France-Presse*, 16 November 2001.
- Lee, Richard Borshay. "Twenty-First Century Indigenism." *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 4 (2006): 455–79.
- Leland, Charles Godfrey. *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*. London: David Nutt, 1899.
- Lesiv, Mariya. "Glory to Dazhboh (Sun-God) or to All Native Gods?: Monotheism and Polytheism in Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism." *Pomegranate* 11, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.
- . *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2013.
- Lose, David. "The Gospel According to 'Game of Thrones'." *Huffington Post*. 6 June, 2013. Accessed 8 February 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/the-gospel-according-to-game-of-thrones\\_b\\_3395995.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/the-gospel-according-to-game-of-thrones_b_3395995.html)
- Magliocco, Sabina. "Ritual Is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art among Contemporary Pagans." In *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, edited by James R. Lewis, 93–120. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Marrs, Texe. *Dark Secrets of the New Age: Satan's Plan for a One World Religion*. Austin: Rivercrest Publishing, 2000.
- Martin, George R. R. *A Game of Thrones 4-Book Bundle: A Song of Ice and Fire Series: A Game of Thrones, a Clash of Kings, a Storm of Swords, and a Feast for Crows*. New York: Bantam, 2011.
- . "Game of Thrones - Season 2 [DVD]: Religions of Westeros." 7 min.: HBO, 2012.
- Matchar, Emily. "Inside the Prepper Survivalist Movement." *Outside*, 10 July 2012.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. "The Women and the Thrones." *New York Review of Books* 60, no. 17 (2013): 40–44.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *The Twilight Saga Complete Collection*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2010.
- Minc, Alain. *Le Nouveau Moyen Âge*. Paris: Gallimard 1993.
- More, Charles. *Britain in the Twentieth Century*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Moynihan, Michael, and Didrik Söderlind. *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. Port Townsend: Feral House, 2003.
- NCR. "The 'Culture-Warrior' Model." *National Catholic Reporter* 48, no. 22 (2012): 28.
- Neumann, Iver B. "'Religion in the Global Sense': The Relevance of Religious Practices for Political Community in Battlestar Galactica and Beyond." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (2011): 387–401.
- O'Reilly, Bill. *Culture Warrior*. New York: Doubleday, 2006.
- Partridge, Christopher. "Occulture is Ordinary." In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 113–33. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- . "Occulture is Ordinary." In *First International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism*. Stockholm University, 2012.
- Pike, Sarah M. *Earthy Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

- . *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Pinner, David. *Ritual*. London: Hutchinson/Arrow, 1967.
- Poniewozik, James. “History Launches *Vikings* (and an Action-Packed *Bible*).” *Time*. 1 March 2013. <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/03/01/tv-weekend-history-launches-vikings-and-an-action-packed-bible/>
- Porter, Lynnette R., David Lavery, and Hillary Robson. *Finding Battlestar Galactica: An Unauthorized Guide*. Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2008.
- Radia, Kirit. “Russia’s War on Halloween.” *ABC News.com*. 26 October 2012.
- RavenWolf, Silver. *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation*. Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 1998.
- Richards, Jeffrey. “From Christianity to Paganism: The New Middle Ages and the Values of ‘Medieval’ Masculinity.” *Cultural Values* 3, no. 2 (1999): 213–34.
- Riordan, Rick. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians (Books 1–5)*. New York: Hyperion, 2011.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter (Books 1–7)*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 1997–2007.
- Saunders, Robert A. “Pagan Places: Towards a Religiogeography of Neopaganism.” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 7 (2013): 786–810.
- Schnoebelen, William. *Wicca: Satan’s Little White Lie*. Ontario: Chick Publications, 2011.
- Schoone, Jaron Daniël. “‘Why Is the World So Full of Injustice?’: Gods and the Problem of Evil.” In *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords*, edited by Henry Jacoby, 154–67. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
- Schwalb, Robert J. *A Song of Ice & Fire Rpg: A Game of Thrones Edition*. Seattle: Green Ronin Publishing, 2012.
- Shnirelman, Victor. “‘Christians! Go Home’: A Revival of Neo-Paganism between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia (an Overview).” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 2 (2002): 197–211.
- Sinex, Margaret. “‘Monsterized Saracens,’ Tolkien’s Haradrim, and Other Medieval ‘Fantasy Products’.” *Tolkien Studies* 7, no. 1 (2010): 175–96.
- Spiegel, Michael. “Character in a Post-National World: Neomedievalism in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*.” *Mosaic* 43, no. 3 (2010): 119–34.
- Stanley, Tim. “Blood Oath Twilight Generation.” *The Spectator*, 29 December 2012.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula: A Mystery Story*. New York: W.R. Caldwell, 1897.
- Strmiska, Michael. “The Evils of Christianization.” In *Cultural Expressions of Evil and Wickedness: Wrath, Sex, Crime*, edited by Terrie Waddell, 59–72. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.
- . “Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives.” In *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Michael Strmiska, 1–54. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005.
- Sutcliffe, Steven. *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Szilárdi, Réka. “Ancient Gods—New Ages: Lessons from Hungarian Paganism.” *Pomegranate* 11, no. 1 (2009): 44–57.
- Tarr, Carrie, and Brigitte Rollet. *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women’s Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s*. London and New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009.
- Trafford, Simon, and Aleks Pluskowski. “Antichrist Superstars: The Vikings in Hard Rock and

- Heavy Metal.” In *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, edited by David W. Marshall, 57–73. Jefferson: McFarland, 2007.
- Trentmann, Frank. “Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (1994): 583–626.
- Umberto, Eco. *The Name of the Rose*. Translated by William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1983.
- Waldron, David. “Witchcraft for Sale! Commodity Vs. Community in the Neopagan Movement.” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9, no. 1 (2005): 32–48.
- White, Ethan Doyle. “In Defense of Pagan Studies: A Response to Davidsen’s Critique.” *Pomegranate* 14, no. 1 (2012): 5–21.
- Winslade, J. Lawton. “Teen Witches, Wiccans, and ‘Wanna-Blessed-Be’s’: Pop-Culture Magic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.” *Slayage: The Journal of the Joss Whedon Studies Association* 1, no. 1 (2001). <http://slayageonline.com/PDF/winslade.pdf>.
- Wooden, Cindy. “New Attention Given to 2003 Cardinal Ratzinger Letter on Harry Potter.” *Catholic News Service*, 14 July 2005.
- Wright, B. W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- Zerzan, John. *Future Primitive Revisited*. Port Townsend: Feral House, 2012.
- Zimmer Bradley, Marion. *The Mists of Avalon*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.
- Zimmerman Jones, Andrew. “Of Direwolves and Gods.” In *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin’s a Song of Ice and Fire*, edited by James Lowder, 107–21. Dallas: Smart Pop, 2012.



# Magic Made Modern? Re-evaluating the Novelty of the Golden Dawn's Magic

**Christopher A. Plaisance**

E-mail: [christopher.plaisance@gmail.com](mailto:christopher.plaisance@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

This is an article in the history of magic that re-evaluates Alison Butler's thesis regarding the novelty of the magical praxis of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. It consists of a response to two claims made by Butler as to the morphological novelty of the order's magic: 1) the utilization of active, as opposed to passive modalities of the *vis imaginativa*; and 2) the techniques of unmediated invocation. In both domains, not only do Butler's works mischaracterize the practices of the Golden Dawn itself, but also wrongly identifies these categories as instances of innovation. In fact, there is a strong degree of formal similarity between the ritual mechanics of the order and those earlier antique, medieval, and Renaissance practitioners in the specific areas of visualization and invocation. These similarities strongly call into question the characterization of the Golden Dawn's magic as fundamentally modern in form.

## **Keywords**

Golden Dawn; Magic; Theurgy; Neoplatonism; Western Esotericism

## **Introduction**

During the course of its brief yet explosive existence, the chief officers of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (hereafter the Golden Dawn) developed and promulgated a practice of magic which drew on techniques and doctrines culled from a wide variety of antique, medieval, and Renaissance

sources, harmonizing them into a unique system.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, several scholars have analyzed the ways in which the curriculum of the order represented a fundamentally modern transformation of Western esoteric praxis. Among these stand two works of Alison Butler: the essay, “Making Magic Modern: Nineteenth-Century Adaptions,”<sup>2</sup> and the monograph, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition*.<sup>3</sup> In both the essay and monograph, Butler defends the thesis that the Golden Dawn’s magic was a constructed tradition which, while drawing on antique sources, re-interpreted and filtered these sources through distinctly Victorian lenses, the result of which was a *new* magic whose intrinsic modernity can be contrasted against the magic of prior historical epochs.<sup>4</sup> *Victorian Occultism* is of particular importance in that it is only the second full-length monograph to deal exclusively with the Golden Dawn’s complex relationship with the two, seemingly opposed, poles of traditionalism and modernism.<sup>5</sup>

Discussing the idea of continuity and similarity within temporally separated traditions, Olav Hammer describes a framework for comparison composed of the following four levels at which analysis can be undertaken: cultural context, social context, emic interpretation, and form.<sup>6</sup> The first level of cultural context

---

<sup>1</sup> For treatments of the order’s history, see: Ellic Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887–1923* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1972); Ithel Colquhoun, *Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1975); R.A. Gilbert, *Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1983); Mary K. Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1995); R.A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn Scrapbook: The Rise and Fall of a Magical Order* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1997); Daniël van Egmond, “Western Esoteric Schools in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: State University New York Press, 1998), 311–46; Christopher McIntosh, “‘Fräulein Sprengel’ and the Origins of the Golden Dawn: A Surprising Discovery,” *Aries* 11, no. 2 (2011): 249–57.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Butler, “Making Magic Modern: Nineteenth-Century Adaptions,” *The Pomegranate* 6, no. 2 (2004): 213–30.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> This is an argument which runs throughout the whole of both works, but see especially: Butler, *Victorian Occultism*, 17–61.

<sup>5</sup> The other being Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 34–35: “Firstly, there is the formal level: doctrines or rituals may resemble (or differ from) each other at the level of overt characteristics or form. Secondly, there is the level of social context, e.g. questions such as the stratification of the participants and their

has been the principal focus of the bulk of contemporary secondary literature on the subject. Wouter Hanegraaff and Alex Owen's landmark studies, which both discuss the Golden Dawn's magical praxis in terms of Weberian ideas of secularization and disenchantment, exemplify this level of analysis. Hanegraaff sees the Golden Dawn's praxis as distinct from pre-modern forms in that it currently exists within the context of a "disenchanted world" and is thus a "disenchanted magic" whose "dominant tendency" is that of psychologization.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Owen notes that the order's magic represented a "newly envisaged modern subjectivity," and was "both a response to and a measure of a Weberian disenchanted modernity."<sup>8</sup> The second level of social context is dealt with at great length by Owen and Butler, both of whom are particularly keen to clarify the ways in which the Golden Dawn dealt with issues of gender at an intra-organizational level.<sup>9</sup> The third level of emic interpretation has not received a great deal of scholarly attention, in part, I believe, owing to the fact that it is relatively uncontested that the members of the order interpreted their

---

place within society as a whole. Thirdly, there is the level of cultural context, e.g. the place of a given ritual within the ritual cycle or of a doctrine within a general worldview. Fourthly, and finally, there is the level of emic interpretation, i.e. how the specifics of the ritual or doctrine are understood by members of the community."

<sup>7</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World," *Religion* 33 (2003): 336. For further examinations of psychologizing tendencies among broader currents of late modern and contemporary esotericism, see: T.M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 274–82; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 196–97, 216–17, 483–503; Egil Asprem, "Magic Naturalized? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley's Scientific Illuminism," *Aries* 8 (2008): 139–65; Egil Asprem, *Arguing With Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture* (Albany: State University New York Press, 2012), 74–77; Marco Pasi, "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice," in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 53–87.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 248. For further examinations of late modern and contemporary esotericism in terms of Weberian disenchantment and secularization, see: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "New Age Religion and Secularization," *Numen* 47, no. 3 (2000): 288–312; Christopher Partridge, vol. 1 of *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, 2 vols (London: T&T Clark International, 2004–2005), 8–15, 40–44; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox, 2005), 133–46; Kocku von Stuckrad, "Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations: Tracing the Religious and the Esoteric in Secular Culture," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 226–43.

<sup>9</sup> Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 85–113; Butler, "Making Magic Modern," 213–30; Butler, *Victorian Occultism*.

magic as being similar to the historical practices upon which they drew.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth level of morphological similarity is briefly touched by Hanegraaff,<sup>11</sup> but is only dealt with in great detail by Butler, who advances a theory that novelty is the dominant characteristic not only of the levels of social and cultural context, but of the formal level as well. While this level of comparison does not comprise the totality of Butler's argument in favor of the order's overall characteristic of novelty, it does form an essential cornerstone of her thesis. It is this series of claims—that there are strong morphological differences in the ritual mechanics of the Golden Dawn's magic and those pre-modern practices upon which the order drew—which this present study re-evaluates. As such, I neither attempt to affirm nor deny the claims of Owen, Hanegraaff, Butler, or other scholars regarding the first two levels of Hammer's matrix, but intend to show that there are, in fact, important morphological similarities between the ways members of the Golden Dawn and their magical forebears in preceding centuries *practiced* magic.

My analysis of Butler's argument takes the following shape, and is rooted in the "homological-diachronic" method of comparison proposed by Egil Asprem,<sup>12</sup> a method of comparing two phenomena which are at once temporally separated *and* genealogically comparable with respect to a given property.<sup>13</sup> What this means is that the homological-diachronic method of analysis proceeds by comparing two phenomena which are, in terms of a given property under discussion, genealogically related and separated in time. For the purposes of this study then, the bracketed phenomena are the Golden Dawn's magic on the one hand, and the practices of pre-Victorian periods on the other. The points of comparison are the two specific ways in which Butler claims that the former represents a morphological break from the latter.

As such, I first proceed to examine her two claims of instantiations of

<sup>10</sup> The paramount example of this notion of the order existing within the continuum of the *philosophia perennis* can be seen in order's work of emic historiography: W. Wynn Westcott, "The Historical Lecture," in *The Golden Dawn Source Book*, ed. Darcy Küntz (Edmonds: Holmes Publishing Group, 1996), 46–51.

<sup>11</sup> Hanegraaff, "How Magic Survived," 369.

<sup>12</sup> For an outline of the various ways in which phenomena can be analytically compared, see: Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014), 20–27.

<sup>13</sup> Asprem, "Beyond the West," 22. Where *C* signifies comparison, *a* and *b* the two properties being compared, *p* the "*tertium comparationis*," and the arrow indicating a genealogical relationship, Asprem formally defines the homological-diachronic method as: "C (*a*, *b*), where *b* is later than *a* and *a* → *b*, with respect to *p*."

morphologically new ritual praxis. Following this, each claim is independently evaluated in a two-pronged fashion: first, by determining whether or not the claim itself accurately reflects the Golden Dawn’s practice; and second, by investigating the degree to which the claim similarly reflects the practice of “magic” throughout history. As such, I begin with a statement of the three areas in which Butler claims the Golden Dawn innovated. The first instance is in the use of visualization, where she claims that one of the “fundamental changes that the Golden Dawn made to Western magic” was “the dominance of the imagination in the magical process.”<sup>14</sup> The second “fundamental change” alleged to have been made by the Golden Dawn was the shift “from using an intermediary spirit to either directly communicating with the force invoked or invoking, or evocating it within oneself, by either drawing down the power of the macrocosm or bringing it forth from within oneself.”<sup>15</sup> My contention is that in both instances, Butler’s claims of novelty are fundamentally flawed both in terms of how the position of the order itself is presented, as well as in the characterizations of historical practices. Rather than representing a break with tradition, the picture that emerges is one of morphological continuity with the past.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to note that throughout this article, the term “magic” is used in the general sense that appears throughout the Golden Dawn’s literature. This usage is inclusive of practices which have, throughout history, been seen to be diametrically opposed, such as, on the one hand, operations designed to transform the operator into a receptacle for the gods, and on the other, operations designed to effect mundane goals such as obtaining money or a lover. In antiquity, this distinction was generally made via the utilization of distinct terminologies—with *θεουργία* (theurgy, divine work) referring to the former class, and *γοητεία* (sorcery) to the latter.<sup>16</sup> From the fifth century B.C. onward, *γοητεία* tended to be equated with the term *μαγεία* (magic),<sup>17</sup> though *μαγεία* was sometimes linguistically utilized in ways

---

<sup>14</sup> Butler, “Making Magic Modern,” 213.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>16</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries: Translated with Introduction and Notes*, ed. and trans. Emma C. Clarke et. al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 3.25.160. For a fuller treatment of this particular dichotomy, see: Gregory Shaw, “Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus,” *Traditio* 41 (1985): 1–28.

<sup>17</sup> Gorgias, *Fragmenta*, in vol. 2 of *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 2nd ed., eds. H. Diels and W. Kraz, 4 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1952), fr. 10; Plato, *Respublica*, in vol. 4 of *Platonis opera*, ed. John Burnet, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900–1907), 346b–c; Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6 vols, ed. and trans. A.H. Armstrong (London: William Heinemann, 1966–1988), 4.4.40.1–6.

which bore more resemblance to *θεουργία* than *γοητεία*.<sup>18</sup> While a thorough treatment of the ways in which these terms were adapted between antiquity and the emergence of the Golden Dawn is far beyond this article's scope, it will suffice to say that there is enough variability that the semantic equation of the contemporary term "magic" with any antique cognates is a dangerous simplification.<sup>19</sup> I find little value in projects to construct a universal definition of "magic,"<sup>20</sup> siding with those scholars—largely classical philologists and discourse theorists—who opt to distinguish practices by the specific vocabularies used by the practitioners themselves.<sup>21</sup> As such, references to "magic" throughout this article will strictly refer to the practices of the Golden Dawn. The earlier practices will either be denoted by the native terminologies wherein they are found, or by neutral terms (e.g. practice or operation).

<sup>18</sup> This is particularly evident in the use of the phrase "ἱερῶς μαγείας" (holy magic) in the magical papyri: *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, ed. and trans. by Karl Preisendanz, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1928–1931), 1.127.

<sup>19</sup> For discussions of these terminological transformations, see: Dorothy Hammond, "Magic: A Problem in Semantics," *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 6 (1970): 1349–56; Jan N. Bremmer, "The Birth of the Term 'Magic,'" in *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1–11; Michael D. Bailey, "The Meanings of Magic," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–23.

<sup>20</sup> Edward B. Tylor, vol. 1 of *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1920), 112; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 12–14; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915), 42–44; Lynn Thorndike, vol. 1 of *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–1958), 4; Bronislaw Malinowski, "Magic, Science, and Religion," in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Redfield (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1948), 8.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Segal, "Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions: Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, eds. R. van den Broek and Maarten J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 351; Hans Dieter Betz, "Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri," in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, eds. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 244–47; Christopher A. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells," in *Magika Hiera*, eds. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 20; John R. Gager, "Introduction," in *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, ed. John R. Gager (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 24–25; Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 18; Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 18–19; Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xviii–xix; Cf. Bernd-Christian Otto, *Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011); Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, eds., *Defining Magic: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

## The *Vis Imaginativa*

Antoine Faivre defined the *vis imaginativa* (imaginative faculty) as “a particular aspect of this wider field that is the creative imagination, [which] is often rooted in a concept of divinity and of humanity as conceived as imagining powers.”<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that Faivre’s definition explicitly gives an *active* role to the imagination—a role which Butler relegates to the province of modernity. To clarify her position, Butler admits that the dipolar roles of will and imagination were crucial in late antique Platonism; however, she tells us that the use of the *vis imaginativa* within the theurgy of Iamblichus (as an example) was strictly passive and receptive rather than active and constructive as was its use in the Golden Dawn.<sup>23</sup> Butler’s claim is that within antique theurgy, “the human will [...] was under the control of the divine and the imagination was used by that divinity to produce visions,”<sup>24</sup> after which his will could be co-opted by the gods to effect the kinds of physical changes associated with “wonder-working” types of operations.<sup>25</sup> This was, her theory goes, radically altered with the magic of the Golden Dawn, wherein “the magical procedure is directed by the magician’s will and imagination”<sup>26</sup> and that “the individual will and imagination are not subordinate to a divine will.”<sup>27</sup> This active imaginative magical faculty, she claims, was then used by the order’s magicians to “effect physical change.”<sup>28</sup>

When investigating the source material concerning the Golden Dawn’s magical practice, what we see in regards to the *vis imaginativa* is a distinction made between the ways in which it is applied to magic that is concerned with physical wonders versus that which is divine in nature. While the order’s uses of the imagination directed towards actualizing material ends *do* conform to Butler’s analysis, we will see that those methods of will-directed imaginative power were *also* common fare in past centuries. Additionally, it will become clear that the Golden Dawn’s more divinely oriented uses of the *vis imaginativa* were *not* purely constructive, as per Butler’s argument, but used the constructive

---

<sup>22</sup> Antoine Faivre, “*Vis Imaginativa: A Study of Some Aspects of the Magical Imagination and its Mythical Foundations*,” in *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 125.

<sup>23</sup> Butler, “Making Magic Modern,” 225–56; Butler, *Victorian Occultism*, 156–57.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Victorian Occultism*, 156–57.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–22.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, “Making Magic Modern,” 225–26.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, *Victorian Occultism*, 156–57.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–22.

faculties in tandem with imaginative receptivity—a technique which also has an exceedingly long lineage. Tanya Luhrmann provides a succinct account of how fundamental creative visualization is to modern magical praxis: “visualization is explicitly part of the magical technology, the means by which the magic works [...] so that the skill in ‘bringing the power through’ depends directly on the ability to visualize.”<sup>29</sup> Although Luhrmann is specifically referencing the practices of a group which emerged from the wreckage of the Golden Dawn’s tumultuous dissolution in the first years of the twentieth-century—specifically, the “Western Mystery” groups of Dion Fortune’s (1890–1946) student, Gareth Knight (b. 1930)—her statement on the tremendous importance of visualization does indeed hold true for the original order as well as its offshoots.<sup>30</sup>

In describing the mechanics by which the order’s materially oriented magic operates, one of the Flying Rolls (a class of instructional documents circulated within the order) paints the following picture: “when a man imagines he actually creates a form on the Astral or even some higher plane; and this form is as real and objective to intelligent beings on that plane, as our earthly surroundings are to us.”<sup>31</sup> This underscores not only the objective way in which the order’s magicians believed imagined forms to exist, but also conveys the fact that such forms were constructs of the individual magician’s will.<sup>32</sup> William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925) expands on this position, telling the student that the creative faculty of the mind is the imagination, and that by empowering the imagination with the will, ideas can be externally manifested.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the most concise statement on the order’s teachings regarding materially oriented will-directed imaginative magic comes from Florence Farr (1860–1917), who gives the student of the order a practical method of instruction in its use:

---

<sup>29</sup> Luhrmann, *Persuasions*, 191.

<sup>30</sup> Hanegraaff similarly notes the tremendous importance that the imagination plays in the Golden Dawn’s magical practice. He describes the “Middle Pillar Exercise”—a practice in which the magician visualizes his body coinciding with the macrocosmic Tree of Life (a visual representation of the Hebrew Kabbalah’s emanative ontology which was utilized by the Golden Dawn)—as something which “epitomises the basic approach to ‘magic’ in modern occultism, which rests essentially on training the imagination by means of visualisation techniques.” Hanegraaff, “How magic survived,” 369.

<sup>31</sup> William Edmund Berridge and William Wynn Westcott, “Flying Roll No. 5: Some Thoughts on the Imagination and Supplementary Remarks,” in *Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy*, ed. Francis King (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987), 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 47: “to practice magic, both the Imagination and the Will must be called into action, they are co-equal in the work.”

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

1. To visualize one's head as a globe like center from which radiate "rays" of thought.
2. Strongly visualize the desired change one wishes to effect.
3. Concentrate the mental rays on this image until it is felt as a "glowing ball of compacted force."
4. Then, project it outward, onto the subject which is to be affected.<sup>34</sup>

Paramount in Farr's description of the Golden Dawn's methods for materially oriented operations is that the desired effect is directly caused by the imagination as empowered by the individual will—and in this we see Butler's description of the order's method is quite accurate.

As accurately as Butler denotes the practices described above, such uses of the *vis imaginativa* were not by any means the only—or even the principle—ways in which the faculty was used. Rather, the specific usage that we see quite prominently discussed is one that combines active and passive modalities. Describing the latter portion of this constructive-cum-receptive usage, Westcott tells the student that one of the most important aims of the Adept is "the extension of our powers of perception so that we can perceive entities, events and forces upon the super-sensuous planes."<sup>35</sup> This mode of perception—called the "spirit vision" within order documents—and methods for obtaining it comprise a great deal of the order's instructional materials. Farr details the method as such:

1. The magician performs a banishing ritual.
2. He then visualizes some object, like a Tarot card.
3. This image is held until the magician seems "to see *into* it."
4. This then precipitates the vision, which the magician receives by "passing into a state of reverie."<sup>36</sup>

What is key to note in this method is that while the magician *does* begin the operation with the same active imagination detailed before, this constructive usage gives way to reception; the active mode is but a means by which

---

<sup>34</sup> Florence Farr, "Flying Roll No. 2, Part 3: Three Suggestions on Will Power," in *Astral Projection*, ed. Francis King (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987), 59–60.

<sup>35</sup> William Wynn Westcott, "Flying Roll No. 19: The Aims and Means of Adeptship," in *Astral Projection*, ed. Francis King (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987), 115.

<sup>36</sup> Florence Farr and Elaine Simpson, "Flying Roll No. 4: An Example of a Mode of Attaining to Spirit Vision and What Was Seen by Two Adepts," in *Astral Projection*, ed. Francis King (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987), 71.

the passive can be utilized. Moina (1865–1928) and S.L. MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918) drive home the importance of this second, receptive use of the *vis imaginativa* in one of the order's instructional papers—reminding the student that he “must be prepared to receive impressions of scenes, forms and sounds as vivid thought forms.”<sup>37</sup> In this fashion, members would engage in experiments whose results were described both in terms of having visions of spiritual beings and in other cases of the magician's imagined form—the so-called “astral” body—passing through the visualized image to enter into the spiritual realm proper to it.<sup>38</sup>

These uses of the active-cum-receptive *vis imaginativa* were not limited to single-person exercises. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) relays a notable anecdote in his *Autobiographies* whereupon MacGregor Mathers caused him to see a vision of “a desert and a black Titan raising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins.”<sup>39</sup> Mathers apparently did so by instructing Yeats to hold a piece of cardboard with the symbol of the Titan—identified by Mathers as “a being of the order of Salamanders”—although he later told Yeats that “it was not necessary to even show the symbol, it would have been sufficient that he imagined it.”<sup>40</sup> Discounting the question of the story's objective veracity, it demonstrates perfectly the dipolar use of imagination in the divinely oriented magic of the Golden Dawn, with Yeats acting, in this instance, as the receptive party and Mathers as the active. Thus, we see that Butler's description of the Golden Dawn's imaginative practice as strictly active and constructive misses the mark. Rather, it appears that while there *were* strictly active uses of this *vis imaginativa* within the order's ritual praxis, dipolar uses that blended active *and* passive modes predominated.

Throughout the preceding history of Western esotericism this same dipolar use of the imaginative faculty presents itself. Speaking of the mode of pure receptivity, Gregory Shaw details the ways with which the late classical Neoplatonic theurgists utilized the imagination.<sup>41</sup> He notes Iamblichus's (c. 245–c. 325)

---

<sup>37</sup> Moina Mathers and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, “Of Skrying and Travelling in the Spirit-Vision,” in *The Golden Dawn*, ed. Israel Regardie et al., 6th ed. (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 467–68.

<sup>38</sup> One of the clearest accounts of these practices, and the methodic distinctions between “skrying” and “travelling” in the spirit vision is in: Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, “Flying Roll No. 11: Clairvoyance,” in *Astral Projection*, ed. Francis King (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987), 75–83.

<sup>39</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan Press, 1961), 185–86.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 185–86.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: The

statement that the gods are seen through the “*ψυχῆς ὀφθαλμοῖς*” (eyes of the soul)<sup>42</sup>—i.e. the imaginative medium—as well as Proclus’s (412–485) description that the gods tend to be seen with closed eyes through the “*ἀγγοιδέσι τῶν ψυχῶν περιβλήμασιν*” (luminous garment of the soul).<sup>43</sup> As these descriptions of pure imaginative receptivity do comport to Butler’s description of antique practices, let us broaden our scope and examine two striking instances of the active-cum-receptive use. We find our first example in Plotinus (c. 204–270), whose imaginative praxis bears a striking similarity to certain techniques of the Golden Dawn described above. He instructs the reader to begin by creating an image of the universe in its totality within their imagination. This visualization is to be as realistic and life-like as possible, so as to be a most suitable receptacle for the vision that is to follow. If properly constructed, Plotinus tells us that God may descend into it—filling this microcosmic image of the cosmos with the macrocosm and all its gods.<sup>44</sup> In this example we see a clear instance of the imagination being first used in the active mode, to create an image, and second in a receptive mode, to channel the vision into the constructed image. In a similar vein, we find a technique utilizing the *vis imaginativa* described in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>45</sup> Under this set of instructions, the operator is instructed to envision himself *as* God; this is to say that he is to visualize his own form as being identical with the body of God (i.e. the cosmos). In doing so, he is able to obtain *νοῆσαι τὸν θεόν* (understanding of God). Again, what we have here is a clear instance of the same type of active-cum-passive imaginative operation that was the hallmark of the Golden Dawn’s praxis.

Moving forward to the Middle Ages, we see a similar picture with the types of imaginative exercises found in instructions and descriptions of imaginative practices running the full gamut from pure receptivity, pure constructivity, and the mixture detailed above. One of the clearest medieval examples of the active-cum-passive uses of the imaginative faculty is the *Liber visionum* of John of Morigny (fourteenth century).<sup>46</sup> Referencing the visualization exercises Luhr-

---

Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 220–21.

<sup>42</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 2.6.82.

<sup>43</sup> Proclus, *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem publicam commentarii*, ed. Wilhelm Kroll, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1899–1901), 1.39.9–11.

<sup>44</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.8.9.

<sup>45</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. A.D. Nock and trans. A.J. Festugière, 4 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1946–1954), 11.20

<sup>46</sup> *Liber visionum* is, itself, “the first part or book of John’s three part work *Liber florum celestis doctrine*,” a critical edition of which is currently being prepared by Claire Fanger and Nicholas Watson. Claire Fanger, “*Libri Nigromantici*: The Good, the Bad, and the Ambiguous in John

mann describes “as central to the meditative programs of modern pagans,” Frank Klaassen notes that “explicit visualization exercises also occur,” in this text, “in which the operator must contemplate scenes from the life of Christ or the virgin.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, as with the uses of the *vis imaginativa* we saw in Plotinus and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, John’s method begins with active visualisation which then transforms into the passive reception of visions. The prologue to *Liber visionum* is quite clear in its assertion that the receiving of visions from the divine is precipitated by willed visualizations performed by the operator. He is instructed to “cogita hic quod tu sis in itinere paradisi” (think about being on the road to paradise)<sup>48</sup> Moreover, this initial type of “ymaginatio” (imagination)—along with other, more specific exercises detailed later in the book—is further described as one of the key steps towards obtaining a theophany.<sup>49</sup>

In his analysis of *Liber visionum*, Nicholas Watson notes that this kind of “intellectual vision”—that is, willed visualization—was not at all uncommon in medieval works on mysticism and magic.<sup>50</sup> This fact is also noted by Faivre, who finds that “during the Middle Ages, there was no dearth of philosophers to expound this *vis imaginativa*.”<sup>51</sup> Klaassen divides these visualization exercises into two broad categories: structured, guided visualizations (like *Liber visionum*) and less guided visualizations.<sup>52</sup> He notes the explicit rarity of the former in medieval texts, but demonstrates that visual imagery of the incantations and prayers as used in ritual practices during that period fall under the second category.<sup>53</sup> Klaassen further notes the “strong commonalities between the “visionary scripts” of medieval affective piety and those appearing in necromantic manuals.”<sup>54</sup> He theorizes the passages in medieval necromantic texts which describe the visions that an operator is *supposed* to have after performing a specific ritual *actually* may have been a “visionary-script” which functioned

of Morigny’s *Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7, no. 2 (2012): 165.

<sup>47</sup> Frank Klaassen, “Subjective Experience and the Practice of Medieval Ritual Magic,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7, no. 1 (2012): 39.

<sup>48</sup> John of Morigny, “The Prologue to John of Morigny’s *Liber Visionum*: Text and Translation,” ed. and trans. Claire Fanger and Nicholas Watson, *Esoterica* 3 (2001): §50.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, §45.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Watson, “John the Monk’s *Book of Visions of the Blessed and Undeified Virgin Mary, Mother of God*: Two Versions of a Newly Discovered Ritual Magic Text,” in *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 174.

<sup>51</sup> Faivre, “*Vis Imaginativa*,” 100.

<sup>52</sup> Klaassen, “Subjective Experience,” 40.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–43.

as a sort of guided meditation in the same manner as the contemporary texts of affective piety.<sup>55</sup>

Stepping into the Renaissance, we begin with the patriarch of fifteenth century Neoplatonism, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499). The constructive use of the *vis imaginativa* was integral to Ficino’s praxis.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Ficino’s use of the imaginative faculty was not purely receptive, as is evidenced by the fact that his principal method of invoking planetary intelligences relied heavily on active visualization done in tandem with—but potentially in the absence of—a variety of physical stimuli.<sup>57</sup> An example of this formula is found in Ficino’s instruction on “quomodo spiritus fiat Solaris” (how the spirit is made solar) where he implores the practitioner to “Solaria induas, habites, conspicias, audias, olfacias, imagineris, cogites, cupias” (wear, inhabit, view, hear, smell, imagine, think about, and desire solar things) so as to transform oneself into a suitable receptacle for the solar spirit.<sup>58</sup> D.P. Walker notes that Ficino would apply the forces of the imagination—alongside appropriate words and music—both in the manufacture and use of planetary amulets.<sup>59</sup> Ficino specifically notes that the active use of the imagination is the key factor in the use of telestic images, and that when it came to the use of such talismans—or of medicine—that the imaginatively empowered belief in the medicine’s efficacy was vital to its efficacy.<sup>60</sup>

We also see a clear continuation within Renaissance esotericism of the aforementioned visionary scripts of medieval affective piety in the imaginative techniques of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). Luhrmann draws a distinct connection between the visualization exercises of contemporary magicians and the system of Ignatius, noting that “the effect of imaging has been known

<sup>55</sup> For affective pietist practices, see: Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 103; D.P. Walker, *Spiritual & Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 76.

<sup>57</sup> Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 79–80.

<sup>58</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes*, eds. and trans. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clarke (Tempe: The Renaissance Society of America, 1998), 3.14.

<sup>59</sup> Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 80. This Ficinian technique bears strong similarities to Don Skemmer’s interpretation of medieval amulet magic. In describing the seals and sigils of amulets, he theorises that the magician would seek to enhance the amulet’s magical efficacy by means of the active visualization of the sigil. Don C. Skemmer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 205, 225.

<sup>60</sup> Ficino, *Three Books*, 3.20.

for centuries” and “is particularly vividly illustrated in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.”<sup>61</sup> These close formal similarities between modern esoteric visualization and Ignatian techniques are also noted by Ann Taves, who compares the visualizations found in Wiccan rituals both to Catholic “lay practices of meditation and visualization” and Ignatius’s more structured exercises.<sup>62</sup> The thrust of Ignatius’s work, *Exercitia spiritualia*, is that these are not strictly visions that were received by the author, but rather are visionary scripts to be used by others so that they may derive a genuine religious experience from the practice. In a memorable passage from the *Exercitia*, Ignatius instructs the student to visualize his soul as being a prisoner inside his body.<sup>63</sup> The language used by Ignatius clearly demonstrates that the operator is to create these visions within his mind’s eye—that these are cues for the operator’s active imagination.

One of the clearest statements on the *vis imaginativa* in Renaissance *magia* is found in the works of Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535). Christopher Lehrich describes the imagination in Agrippa’s *magia* as the faculty which bridges “the barrier between natural and celestial,” and as the means by which “human minds can affect nature.”<sup>64</sup> As Butler describes pre-modern practitioners using the imaginative faculty (and as we have seen in examples from antiquity), Agrippa does describe the imagination in terms of pure receptivity, noting that the “*virtus imaginativa et cogitativa*” (imaginative and cogitative powers) are the means by which man prehends all things.<sup>65</sup> However, in *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, we also find a strictly active use of the imaginative faculty that bears extremely strong similarities to Farr’s methods for materially oriented operations. He explicitly tells us that an elevated soul may, by means of a “*vehementi imaginatione accensa*” (vehemently inflamed imagination) affect the health of its own body and those of others.<sup>66</sup> Neither was this belief in the efficacy of will-driven imagination a peculiarity of Agrippa’s. Ficino’s student, Francesco Diacceto (1466–1522) informs us that his teacher believed, for example, that the inflamed imagination can fly out through the eyes—and other bodily

---

<sup>61</sup> Luhrmann, *Persuasions*, 194.

<sup>62</sup> Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 154–55.

<sup>63</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *Exercitia spiritualia in sacra octo dierum solitudine* (Woodstock: Coll. SS. Cordis, 1892), 42.

<sup>64</sup> Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels: Cornelius Agrippa’s Occult Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 42.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, ed. V. Perrone Compagni (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 3.43.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.65.

channels—to influence the course of external events.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Athanasius Kircher (c. 1602–1680) taught that the “magna & stupenda vis imaginativæ facultatis” (great and wonderful imaginative faculty) was capable of such wonders as bringing about disease or altering the appearance of a fetus.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, no tour of Renaissance utilization of the *vis imaginativa* would be complete without incorporating the techniques of active imagination which comprised the *ars memorativa* (art of memory).<sup>69</sup> It is not surprising to see how a practice involving this kind of imaginative construction of vast pieces of architecture containing images of items to be later recalled would have been very attractive to practitioners of Renaissance *magia*. The first man to make the connection between the two domains of praxis was Giulio Camillo (c. 1480–1544),<sup>70</sup> who did so by making use of the Hermetic axiom of the reflexivity of the microcosm and the macrocosm.<sup>71</sup> Camillo’s “memory theatre” allowed the operator to, through visualization, construct an interior model of the universe through which he could come to know God—a practice which we saw made use of by Proclus and in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>72</sup> Thus, by constructing a mirror image of the cosmos within, he was able to receive the influence of the divine, transforming the previously rhetorical *ars memorativa* into a technique through which the microcosm could more aptly reflect the macrocosm.<sup>73</sup> This idea was carried forward by Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), who explicitly transformed the *ars memorativa* into an *ars magica*. Bruno built upon Camillo’s use of Hermetic reflexivity to create an active imaginative

<sup>67</sup> Francesco Diacceto, *Opera omni Francisci Catanei Diacetii* (Basil: Petri et Perna, 1563), 46.

<sup>68</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Scrutinium physico-medicum contagiosa luis, quæ dicitur pestis* (Leipzig: Schurenianor and Joh. Fritzschi, 1671), 64.

<sup>69</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 2–3: The *ars memorativa* was originally a rhetorical technique “by which the orator could improve his memory, which would enable him to deliver long speeches from memory with unfailing accuracy.” This was achieved by first imprinting “a series of *loci* or places [...] on the memory,” by imagining a spacious building, complete with a multitude of rooms and ornaments, whereupon the orator would place “images by which the speech is to be remembered”—that is to say, that images relating to key sections of the speech would be placed in a specific order throughout the imaginal building. Once done, when wishing to remember a speech, the orator would “walk” through this building in his imagination, recalling his speech by means of the parade of images.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 148–49.

<sup>71</sup> This metaphysical position, that lower hypostases are reflections of higher levels, is a foundational point in Hermetic metaphysics: cf. *Asclepius* in vol. 2 of *Corpus Hermeticum*, §37.

<sup>72</sup> Yates, *Art of Memory*, 148–49. Giulio Camillo, *L’idea del Teatro* (Florence: 1550).

<sup>73</sup> Yates, *Art of Memory*, 157–58.

practice whose aim was “to establish this magical ascent within.”<sup>74</sup> Bruno’s system was a “magico-religious technique for grasping and unifying the world of appearances through the arrangements of significant images” that solely operated by means of the active use of imagination.<sup>75</sup> These techniques all bear strong formal similarities to the active-cum-passive utilizations of the imaginative faculty described in the Golden Dawn’s instructional documents.

### Unmediated Invocation

We now begin the second portion of our re-evaluation of the Golden Dawn’s alleged newness: Butler’s claims regarding invocatory techniques used by the order. In unpacking this point, Butler tells us that “medieval and early modern ritual magic traditionally involved three parties: the magician, the god or divine entity whose power is invoked and a spiritual intermediary.”<sup>76</sup> She notes the Solomonic genre as typical of this formula, where the angelic or demonic beings function as intermediary spirits between God and the necromancer.<sup>77</sup> She contrasts this against the order’s use of Mathers’s translation of *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*, a late medieval text written by Abraham of Worms (c. 1362–c. 1458) that contains a system of magic purported to have been taught to him by an Egyptian magician named Abramelin, as an “example of the exclusion of an intermediary” where “the magician’s goal is to achieve direct communication with his guardian angel.”<sup>78</sup> She claims that the Golden Dawn’s invocatory techniques were strict, two-party operations involving only the operator and the god or spirit he was invoking. Her description of the order’s praxis parses it as either “bringing the power or aspect of the deity, or spirit, into him/herself” or “bringing the power or aspect of the deity, or spirit, up out of the corresponding region of him/herself.”<sup>79</sup> This process was one that Butler claims completely eliminated the traditional types of intermediaries (everything from lesser spirits to children) that abounded in pre-modern magic. She does note that this technique of direct, intermediary-less invoca-

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 228. Bruno’s system is outlined most clearly in: Giordano Bruno, *De umbris idearum*, in vol. 2 of *Jordai Bruni Nolani opera latine conscripta publicis sumptibus edita*, 3 vols. (Naples: D. Morano, 1879–1891), 1–55.

<sup>75</sup> Yates, *Art of Memory*, 229.

<sup>76</sup> Butler, “Making Magic Modern,” 218.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 220; Butler, *Victorian Occultism*, 41.

tion was “a re-interpretation of Neo-Platonic theurgy,” but maintains that the order was responsible for its reintroduction<sup>80</sup>—a claim which necessitates the absence of such techniques during the middle ages and the Renaissance.

In beginning our re-assessment of Butler’s claim, as with our exploration of the *vis imaginativa*, we look first to examine the veracity of her assertions about the praxis of the Golden Dawn itself. One of the order’s fundamental practices was the “vibration” of divine names. This involved a technique in which the operator—by means of imaginative visualization—draws down the “White Rays from above” into the heart of his microcosm, visualizes the letters of the divine name he is invoking in this light, and then proceeds to pronounce the name in such a way that his “whole system” begins to vibrate and will “spread out into space.”<sup>81</sup> An example of this formula is found in the order’s “Ritual for Transformation” where the magician—again, using the constructive-cum-receptive mode of the *vis imaginativa*—builds an imaginary image of Isis, petitions her to descend into this image, and then assumes this image into himself, thus “becoming” the goddess for a time.<sup>82</sup> We find yet another instance in the “Ritual for Spiritual Development,” in which the operator uses the Hellenistic “ἐγώ εἰμι” (I am) formula (to be detailed below) to directly identify himself with the god invoked.<sup>83</sup> Finally, this technique is part and parcel of “The Bornless Ritual for the Invocation of the Higher Genius,”<sup>84</sup> which is a pivotal example of a two-party operation between the operator and his genius being invoked.<sup>85</sup> As with the “Ritual for Spiritual Development,” this rite begins with a direct petition to the genius and then culminates with a direct identification between the two parties.

While these four examples certainly do support Butler’s characterization of the order’s praxis, further investigation proves that there are a number of

<sup>80</sup> Butler, “Making Magic Modern,” 221.

<sup>81</sup> “Talismans: The Formation of Talismans and Flashing Tablets,” in *The Golden Dawn*, ed. Israel Regardie et al., 6th ed. (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 491.

<sup>82</sup> “Ritual for Transformation,” in *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., eds. Israel Regardie et al. (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 430–33.

<sup>83</sup> “Ritual for Spiritual Development,” in *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., eds. Israel Regardie et al. (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 440.

<sup>84</sup> “The Bornless Ritual for the Invocation of the Higher Genius,” in *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., eds. Israel Regardie et al. (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 442–45.

<sup>85</sup> The “Higher Genius” with which this ritual is concerned is described by Westcott in page 115 of “Flying Roll No. 19 as the principal goal towards which adepts of the Golden Dawn should strive: “as regards Spiritual Development you promised in the Obligation to use every effort to purify and exalt the Spiritual Nature so that you may be able to unify yourself with what the Hermetists call his ‘Higher Genius.’”

instances in which the Golden Dawn's invocatory formulas *did* make use of intermediaries. Following Iamblichus's maxim, lesser entities are always to be evoked by means of the intermediacy of their superiors; the evocation rituals of the order summoned secondary spirits by virtue of the prior invoking of that spirit's superior in the hierarchy.<sup>86</sup> Among the order's various techniques, it is in the Enochian system that we see some of the strongest instances of mediated evocation.<sup>87</sup> The evocation of the angel Enochian Axir that Israel Regardie (1907–1985) presents follows this formula by first invoking the hypostasis of God which governs the angel,<sup>88</sup> and *then* petitioning God to "cause [Axir] to come swiftly."<sup>89</sup> Indeed, the magician even announces to the angel that he does not command him in his own name, "but by the majesty of Adonai Ha-Aretz and Emor Dial Hectega." Apart from official order materials like the rituals described above, we must also delve into two of the order's ancillary works on magic that, while not Golden Dawn material *sensu stricto*, certainly affected its members greatly. The first of these were the Solomonic grimoires translated by Mathers. Butler, as we saw above, contrasted the Solomonic grimoires against the Golden Dawn's technique of invocation; however, as Mathers's translations revived their usage within the order, we cannot treat them as wholly separate from the order's magic.<sup>90</sup> As such, two examples from Mathers's translations of these works serve to reinforce instances of invocatory formulas within the order that make use of intermediaries. *The Key of Solomon* has the operator begin the operation by directly invoking God prior

---

<sup>86</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 9.9.284.

<sup>87</sup> The Enochian magic described in the Golden Dawn documents represents the order's adaptation of materials claimed to have been received by John Dee (1529–1608/9) and Edward Kelley (1555–1597) from various angels during a period extending from 1582 to 1589. For an examination of the Golden Dawn's adaptation of this material, see: Aspren, *Arguing with Angels*, 43–68.

<sup>88</sup> "Evocation Ritual," in *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., eds. Israel Regardie et al. (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 408–09.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 410–11.

<sup>90</sup> Apart from the connection with Mathers himself, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and George Cecil Jones (1873–1960), while members of the Golden Dawn, are known to have made extensive use of the *Lemegeton clavicula Salomonis*. (Hymenaeus Beta, Editor's Introduction to the Second Edition of *The Goetia: The Lesser Key of Solomon the King: Lemegeton—Clavicula Salomonis Regis, Book One*, trans. Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, eds. and ann. Aleister Crowley and Hymenaeus Beta, 2nd ed. (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1995), xiv). For a comparison of Mathers's editions of the Solomonic grimoires with the medieval source material itself, see: Francisco Silva, "Mathers' Translation of the *Clavicula Salomonis*: The Relationship Between Translator, Text and Transmission of a 'Religious' Text" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2009).

to summoning the lesser spirits by God's intermediacy.<sup>91</sup> In an almost identical fashion, *The Goetia* proceeds with the operator explicitly conjuring the demon by means of God's power as well: "I do invoke and conjure thee O Spirit, N.; and being with power armed from the Supreme Majesty, I do strongly command thee."<sup>92</sup>

More important to our examination of Butler's claim is her use of the Abramelin system as being representative of the order's newness while at the same time using the Solomonic texts as exemplars of the medieval necromancy that the Golden Dawn was supposed to be superseding. As there is no doubt that the Abramelin book is a medieval work, whatever techniques we find in it are necessarily *not* indicative of any *true* novelty on the order's part, but speak of the Golden Dawn's willingness to assimilate the practices of past practitioners. The case cannot be made that one type of practice (i.e. the Solomonic genre) is strictly medieval and another (i.e. the Abramelin system) is modern when both types date from the same era and were used by the same Golden Dawn magicians. Thus, if we take the Solomonic texts as examples of ancient practice, then the Abramelin system must be relegated to that category as well—which weakens her argument that the order's invocatory methodology was principally intermediary-less. However, if we take both systems as being representative of the Golden Dawn's magical praxis, then that too weakens Butler's thesis, as the Solomonic formulas described above make copious use of intermediaries. In short, this cannot be an either/or proposition; it can only be both/and.

This issue is doubly compounded by the fact that Butler mischaracterizes the Abramelin system as being intermediary-less, when Mathers's edition makes explicit use of intermediaries throughout. Indeed, the operation is consistently described as a process in which the operator *first* invokes God, who then commands the angel to appear before the operator—a ritual mechanic which is fundamentally no different from the goetic conjuration of demons by means of God's intermediacy. The book describes the operation using stock phrases which are repeated throughout, such as: "a man who should deal with God by the intermediary of His Holy Angels,"<sup>93</sup> or "with God, by the intermediation of His Holy Angels."<sup>94</sup> When describing the actual steps by which the practi-

---

<sup>91</sup> *The Key of Solomon the King (Clavicula Salomonis)*, ed. and trans. Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 2000), 25–26.

<sup>92</sup> *The Goetia*, 81.

<sup>93</sup> Abraham the Jew, *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, as Delivered by Abraham the Jew Unto His Son Lamech, AD 1458*, trans. S.L. MacGregor Mathers (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 58.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

tioner achieves communion with his angel, the Abramelin manual tells us that the practitioner is to entreat “the Lord God that He would deign to command His Holy Angels to lead you in the True Way.”<sup>95</sup> This formula is repeated *ad nauseam* throughout the book.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, Butler’s claim specifically noted that the Golden Dawn’s magic was free from the “innocent” medium of medieval *magia*. However, in the Abramelin book, we find the innocent to be integral to the operation,<sup>97</sup> which serves to diminish further any claims towards the Abramelin system being free from “medieval” intermediaries.

Our investigation having, thus far, challenged Butler’s assertion that the Golden Dawn’s magic was bereft of intermediaries, we delve into the second part of this claim: that this intermediary-less formula was new. As she mentions, this formula originates with late Platonic theurgy. One of the largest repositories of antique spells is the collection known as the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, wherein is found dozens of instances of the “ἐγὼ εἰμι” (I am) formula of invocation, whose prominence is evidenced by a tremendous number of spells.<sup>98</sup> One of the most striking of these examples is the aforementioned ritual that was adapted by the Golden Dawn as “The Bornless Ritual for the Invocation of the Higher Genius.” In its original form, the ritual announces itself as an invocation of the “ἄκεφαλος δαίμων” (headless daemon), and culminates with the operator identifying with that same entity: “σὲ καλῶ τὸν ἄκεφαλον [...] ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἄκεφαλος δαίμων” (I evocate thee, headless one [...] I am the headless daemon).<sup>99</sup> There are no intermediary beings between the operator and this daimon; it is a strict two-party ritual. Similarly, although Iamblichus describes varying degrees of divine invocation—ranging from μετουσία (participation) to κοινωνία (communion) and ἕνωσις (union)—*all* strictly involve the theurgist and the god invoked.<sup>100</sup> He also notes that it is the operator’s use of the “ὀνόματα θεῶν” (“divine names”) and “θεῶν συνθήματα” (“divine symbols”) that are responsible for raising up the operator to the gods—not

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 69–70.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 64, 70–71, 83, 133.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>98</sup> *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 1.247–62, 3.282–409, 3.410–23, 3.633–731, 4.52–85, 4.88–93, 4.94–153, 4.296–466, 4.475–829, 4.930–1114, 4.1929–2005, 4.2241–2358, 4.2967–3006, 4.3125–71, 5.213–303, 5.459–89, 7.405–6, 7.423–28, 7.490–504, 8.1–63, 12.14–95, 12.453–65, 13.335–340, 14.1–92, 14.239–95, 14.295–308, 14.309–34, 14.627–35, 14.701–5, 14.750–71, 14.772–804, 14.841–50, 14.1163–79, 36.161–77, 36.187–210, 36.283–94, 36.312–20, 61.1–30, 69.1–3, 70.4–25, suppl.60–101, suppl.162–68, suppl.168–84, and suppl.185–208.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 5.96–172.

<sup>100</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.5.111.

the intermediary beings.<sup>101</sup>

Although these examples from Late Antiquity do comport to Butler's thesis, her claim that the Golden Dawn's use of this formula was a direct revival of antique Platonic practices means that we should not find intermediary-less invocation present during the intervening centuries; this is, however, not the case. Coming back to *Liber visionum*, we see that John's visions were at times obtained by the direct invocation of the Virgin.<sup>102</sup> John also alludes to something very similar to the Neoplatonic idea of suitability, telling us that the practitioner who wishes to invoke the Virgin must first make himself a suitable vessel.<sup>103</sup> This bears strong similarities to the Neoplatonic ideas of ἐπιτηδεϊότης (fitness, or suitability) and συμπάθεια (sympathy), whereby the operator consciously shapes his interior self into a suitable receptacle into which the divine can manifest. This notion of ἐπιτηδεϊότης is explained by Shaw as analogous to the way wood is dried to enhance its suitability for fire's actualization; in a similar manner the soul is gradually purified to make the operator fit for the manifestation of the gods within him.<sup>104</sup> Klaassen also notes that the direct invocation of the Virgin in *Liber visionum* "is a common feature of the Notory Art which sets it apart from works on conjuring" which deal with intermediaries.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, it comes as no surprise to find nearly identical invocations in the *Ars notoria* and *Liber iuratus Honorii* that directly invoke God for divinely oriented ends. The prayers from both texts begin with formulaic phrasing, invoking "Deus omnipotens" (God almighty) directly.<sup>106</sup> The *Ars notoria*'s prayer then asks for various degrees of divine "intelligentie, et intellectus" (intelligence and understanding),<sup>107</sup> while *Liber iuratus* petitions God for "facialem tiu [...] visionem" (a vision of your face).<sup>108</sup> This brief foray into antique medieval techniques of

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 1.12.42. For a full treatment of Iamblichus' techniques of invocation, see: John M. Dillon, "Iamblichus' Theory of Prayer," in *In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*, 2nd ed. (Wiltshire: The Prometheus Trust, 2009), 407–11.

<sup>102</sup> John the Monk, "The Prologue," §31.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., §48.

<sup>104</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 86.

<sup>105</sup> Frank Klaassen, "English Manuscripts of Magic, 1300–1500: A Preliminary Survey," in *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>106</sup> *L'Arse notoria au Moyen Age: Introduction et édition critique*, ed. Julien Véronèse (Firenze: SISMELE, 2007), 140–41; *Liber iuratus Honorii: A Critical Edition of the Latin Version of the Sworn Book of Honorius*, ed. Gösta Hedegård (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2002), 15.1–5.

<sup>107</sup> *L'Arse notoria*, 140–41.

<sup>108</sup> *Liber iuratus*, 15.1–5.

evocation and invocation is similar to our investigation of the methods of the Golden Dawn itself. We see that practitioners of that era made use of spiritual intermediaries at times, but at other times performed intermediary-less invocations—the general trend being that lesser beings were evoked by means of the intermediacy of their superiors, while those superiors themselves were invoked directly.

Stepping into the Renaissance, we find a similar arrangement. While the “magical” books and techniques of the middle ages still had a great deal of currency during the Renaissance,<sup>109</sup> the fifteenth century also saw a revival of the texts and traditions of late classical theurgy. As such, it is unsurprising to see that Ficino made extensive use of the Neoplatonic notions of “fitness” and “suitability,” whose connection with intermediary-less invocation has already been noted.<sup>110</sup> However, similar to the magicians of the Golden Dawn, it appears that Ficino at some points invoked the planetary intelligences without intermediaries, but at others made use of angelic intermediaries.<sup>111</sup> Diaceto’s description of Ficinian invocation is notably free from any intervening spirits, and simply opens a conduit between the Solar god and the operator—with no intermediary angels or demons involved.<sup>112</sup> The invocatory system of Agrippa too operated in such a fashion that it opened a direct conduit between the operator and God by means of the divine names—a technique which calls to mind Iamblichus’ statement noted above.<sup>113</sup> Agrippa makes a further reference—drawing on the Neoplatonic idea of suitability—to the two-party

---

<sup>109</sup> For an examination of this continuance, see: Frank Klaassen, “Medieval Ritual Magic in the Renaissance,” *Aries* 3, no. 2 (2003): 166–99; Claire Fanger, “Medieval Ritual Magic: What it is and Why We Need to Know More About it,” in *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), vii–xviii; Frank Klaassen, *The Transformation of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); Julien Véronèse, “Magic, Theurgy, and Spirituality in the Medieval Ritual of the *Ars Notoria*,” trans. Claire Fanger, in *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 37–78; Claire Fanger, “Introduction: Theurgy, Magic, and Mysticism,” in *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 1–33.

<sup>110</sup> Ficino, *Three Books*, 3.14.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.22.

<sup>112</sup> Diaceto, *Opera*, 46: “Canit inquam primò diuinæ solis Henadi, canit dein menti, postremò canit animæ. . Siquidem unum, mens, anima, tria rerum, omnium principia sunt” (He first sings to the divine Solar Henad, then he sings to the Mind, and lastly he sings to the Soul. For, the One, Mind, and Soul are the three principles of all).

<sup>113</sup> Lehrich, *The Language*, 183; Agrippa, *De occulta*, 3.11.

invocation of God, telling the reader that the orations “dimoveatque tenebras” (dispell darkness) from our souls, allowing God to illuminate our minds.<sup>114</sup> We find further references still in *De occulta*, where Agrippa makes use of similar techniques to invoke God by means of fixating our thought on him—a technique which, again, makes use of no intermediaries, but is rather an operation solely between the operator and his God.<sup>115</sup> Again, we see a strong degree of morphological similarity between the invocatory techniques of the Golden Dawn and those of past practitioners.

## Conclusion

In summary, what this study has demonstrated is that in both areas examined, Butler’s thesis of the morphological novelty of the Golden Dawn’s magical practice is misfounded. Regarding the *vis imaginativa*, contrary to Butler’s claim that the Golden Dawn’s use of active imagination was both their sole mode of utilizing the imaginative faculty and that this represented an innovation, it found that all three uses of the imaginative faculty—active, passive, and active-cum-passive—were prominent in the order’s praxis, and that the uses of the imagination within selected pre-modern practices bore a remarkable degree of formal similarity to those of the order. It was also found that Butler’s claims as to the use of intermediary-less invocatory formulas within the Golden Dawn were problematic. Not only did we find that the ways in which the order itself invoked spiritual beings were mischaracterized, but the techniques of pre-modern practitioners were similarly mistreated.

This being the case, where does this leave our understanding of the Golden Dawn’s magic? As discussed in the introduction, the formal level treated in this study is but one component of a matrix through which the idea of sameness within a tradition can be analyzed. As such, to speak of the order’s magic as being totally similar, within the context of homological-diachronic comparative analysis, to anything which came before is a position which cannot be argued based solely on this research. However, what I believe we *can* definitively say, within this same methodological framework, is that the ritual mechanics by which the members of the order practiced magic—the formal, morphological level of analysis—are characterized by a strong sense of similarity. In this way it is certainly meaningful to speak of the order’s magic as being, in one

---

<sup>114</sup> Agrippa, *De occulta*, 2.60.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.43.

sense, similar to some of the more commonly evidenced practices of centuries gone by. Thus, while there may very well be ways in which the order's magic was a fundamentally modern transformation, their ritual morphology does not appear to be an instance of magic being made modern.

The ramifications of this conclusion extend beyond the bounds of both Butler's study as well as the Golden Dawn itself. It is inarguable that the magical techniques of the order have, in the wake of Regardie's epochal *The Golden Dawn*,<sup>116</sup> been transferred to and filtered throughout the great majority of contemporary esoteric currents which concern themselves with the practice of ritual magic.<sup>117</sup> As such, if it is the case that—on the morphological level at least—the Golden Dawn's magic can be demonstrated along homological-diachronic lines to be similar to the practices of Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, then the claims of the connections made by these myriad modern groups to past traditions must similarly be re-evaluated.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, in terms of ritual mechanics at the very least, it may be that modern magic on the whole is a great deal *less modern* than it appears to be.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- Abraham the Jew. *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, as Delivered by Abraham the Jew Unto His Son Lamech, AD 1458*. Translated by S.L. MacGregor Mathers. New York: Dover Publications, 1975.
- Agrippa of Nettesheim, Henry Cornelius. *De occulta philosophia libri tres*. Edited by V. Perrone Compagni. Leiden: Brill, 1992.
- Asclepius*. In vol. 2 of *Corpus Hermeticum*, edited by A.D. Nock and translated by A.J. Festugière, 296–355. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1946–1954.
- Berridge, Edmund William and Westcott, William Wynn. "Flying Roll No. 5: Some Thoughts on the Imagination, and Supplementary Remarks." In *Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy*, edited by Francis King, 47–52. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987.
- Bruno, Giordano. *De umbrid idearum*. In vol. 2 of *Jordani Bruni Nolani opera latine conscripta publicis sumptibus edita*, 1–55. Naples: D. Morano, 1879–1891.
- Camillo, Giulio. *L'idea del Teatro*. Florence, 1550.

<sup>116</sup> *The Golden Dawn: An Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn*, ed. Israel Regardie, 4 vols., 1st ed. (Chicago: The Aries Press, 1937–1940).

<sup>117</sup> Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 38–41; Hanegraaff, "How Magic Survived," 366.

<sup>118</sup> For the use of *tradition* as a discursive strategy in contemporary esoteric currents, see: Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 85–200; James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Andreas B. Kilcher, ed., *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

- Corpus Hermeticum*. Edited by A.D. Nock and translated by A.J. Festugière. 4 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1946–1954.
- Diaceto, Francesco. *Opera omni Francisci Catanei Diacetii*. Basil: Petri et Perna, 1563.
- “Evocation Ritual.” In *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., edited by Israel Regardie et al., 402–12. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998.
- Farr, Florence. “Flying Roll No. 2, Part 3: Three Suggestions on Will Power.” In *Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy*, edited by Francis King, 59–60. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987.
- Farr, Florence and Simpson, Elaine. “Flying Roll No. 4: An Example of a Mode of Attaining to Spirit Vision and What Was Seen by Two Adepts.” In *Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy*, edited by Francis King, 71–73. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987.
- Ficino, Marsilio. *Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes*. Edited and translated by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clarke. Tempe: The Renaissance Society of America, 1998.
- Gorgias. *Fragmenta*. In vol. 2 of *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed., edited by H. Diels and W. Kranz, 279–306. Berlin: Weidmann, 1952.
- Iamblichus. *On the Mysteries: Translated with Introduction and Notes*. Translated by Emma C. Clarke et. al. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.
- Ignatius of Loyola. *Exercitia spiritualia in sacra octo dierum solitudine*. Woodstock: Coll. SS. Cordis, 1892.
- John of Morigny. “The Prologue to John of Morigny’s *Liber Visionum: Text and Translation*.” Edited, translated, and introduced by Claire Fanger and Nicholas Watson. *Esoterica* 3 (2001): 108–217.
- Kircher, Athanasius. *Scrutinium physico-medicum contagiosæ luis, quæ dicitur pestis*. Leipzig: Schurerianor & Joh. Fritzschi, 1671.
- L’Ars notoria au Moyen Age: Introduction et édition critique*. Edited by Julien Véronèse. Firenze: SISMELE, 2007.
- Liber iuratus Honorii: A Critical Edition of the Latin Version of the Sworn Book of Honorius*. Edited by Gösta Hedegård. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2002.
- Mathers, Moina and Mathers, Samuel Liddell MacGregor. “Of Skrying and Travelling in the Spirit-Vision.” In *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., edited by Israel Regardie et. al., 467–78. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998.
- Mathers, Samuel Liddell MacGregor. “Flying Roll No. 11: Clairvoyance.” In *Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy*, edited by Francis King, 75–83. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987.
- Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*. Edited and translated by Karl Preisendanz. 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1928–1931.
- Plato. *Respublica*. In vol. 4 of *Platonis opera*, edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900–1907.
- Plotinus. *Enneads*. Edited and translated by A.H. Armstrong. 6 vols. London: William Heinemann, 1966–1988.
- Proclus. *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem publicam commentarii*. Edited by Wilhelm Kroll. 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1899–1901.
- Regardie, Israel, ed. *The Golden Dawn: An Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn*, 1st ed. 4 vols. Chicago: The Aries Press, 1937–1940.
- “Ritual for Spiritual Development.” In *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., edited by Israel Regardie et al., 435–41. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998.

- “Ritual for Transformation.” In *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., edited by Israel Regardie et al., 429–34. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998.
- “Talismans: The Formation of Talismans and Flashing Tablets.” In *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., edited by Israel Regardie et al., 479–504. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998.
- “The Bornless Ritual for the Invocation of the Higher Genius.” In *The Golden Dawn*, 6th ed., edited by Israel Regardie et al., 442–46. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998.
- The Goetia: The Lesser Key of Solomon the King: Lemegeton—Clavicula Salomonis Regis, Book One*, 2nd edition. Translated by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. Edited, annotated and introduced with additions by Aleister Crowley. Edited by Hymenaeus Beta. York Beach: Samuel Weiser 1995.
- The Key of Solomon the King (Clavicula Salomonis)*. Translated and edited by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 2000.
- Westcott, William Wynn. “Flying Roll No. 19: The Aims and Means of Adeptship.” In *Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy*, edited by Francis King, 115–21. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987.
- . “The Historical Lecture.” In *The Golden Dawn Source Book*, edited by Darcy Küntz, 46–51. Edmonds: Holmes Publishing Group, 1996.
- Yeats, William Butler. *Autobiographies*. London: Macmillan Press, 1961.

## Secondary Sources

- Asprem, Egil. *Arguing With Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012.
- . “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism.” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33.
- . “Magic Naturalized? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism.” *Aries* 8 (2008): 139–65.
- Bailey, Michael D. “The Meanings of Magic.” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–23.
- Betz, Hans Dieter. “Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri.” In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, edited by Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 244–59. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Bremmer, Jan N. “The Birth of the Term ‘Magic.’” In *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, edited by Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, 1–11. Leuven: Peeters, 2002.
- Butler, Alison. “Making Magic Modern: Nineteenth-Century Adaptions.” *The Pomegranate* 6, no. 2 (2004): 213–230.
- Butler, Alison. *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Colquhoun, Ithell. *Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1975.
- Dickie, Matthew W. *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Dillon, John M. “Iamblichus’ Theory of Prayer.” In *In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*, 2nd ed., 407–11. (Wiltshire: The Prometheus Trust, 2009).
- Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915.
- Favre, Antoine. “*Vis Imaginativa*: A Study of Some Aspects of the Imagination and Its Myth-

- ical Foundations.” In *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, translated by Christine Rhone, 99–136. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Fanger, Claire. “Introduction: Theurgy, Magic, and Mysticism.” In *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, edited by Claire Fanger, 1–33. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.
- . “*Libri Necromantici*: The Good, the Bad, and the Ambiguous in John of Morigny’s *Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*.” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7, no. 2 (2012): 164–89.
- Fanger, Claire. “Medieval Ritual Magic: What it is and Why We Need to Know More About it.” In *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, edited by Claire Fanger, vii–xviii. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998.
- Faraone, Christopher A. “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells.” In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, edited by Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 3–32. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Abridged ed. New York: Touchstone, 1996.
- Gager, John R. “Introduction.” In *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, edited by John R. Gager, 3–41. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Gilbert, R.A. *Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians*. Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1983.
- . *The Golden Dawn Scrapbook: The Rise and Fall of a Magical Order*. York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1997.
- Graf, Fritz. *Magic in the Ancient World*. Translated by Franklin Philip. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Greer, Mary K. *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses*. Rochester: Park Street Press, 1995.
- Hammer, Olav. *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.
- Hammond, Dorothy. “Magic: A Problem in Semantics.” *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 6 (1970): 1349–56.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World.” *Religion* 33 (2003): 357–80.
- . “New Age Religion and Secularization.” *Numen* 47, no. 3 (2000): 288–312.
- . *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Howe, Ellic. *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887–1923*. York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1978.
- Hymenaeus Beta. “Editor’s Introduction to the Second Edition.” In *The Goetia: The Lesser Key of Solomon the King: Lemegeton—Clavicula Salomonis Regis, Book One*, 2nd ed., translated by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, edited, annotated and introduced with additions by Aleister Crowley, edited by Hymenaeus Beta, xiii–xxvi. York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1995.
- Kilcher, Andreas B., ed. *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Klaassen, Frank. “English Manuscripts of Magic, 1300–1500: A Preliminary Survey.” In *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, edited by Claire Fanger, 3–31. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998.
- . “Medieval Ritual Magic in the Renaissance.” *Aries* 3, no. 2 (2003): 166–99.
- . “Subjective Experience and the Practice of Medieval Ritual Magic.” *Magic, Ritual, and*

- Witchcraft* 7, no. 1 (2012): 19–51.
- . *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.
- Lehrich, Christopher I. *The Language of Demons and Angels: Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Lewis, James R. and Olav Hammer, eds. *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Luhrmann, T.M. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- MacIntosh, Christopher. "Fräulein Sprengel' and the Origins of the Golden Dawn: A Surprising Discovery." *Aries* 11, no. 2 (2011): 249–57.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. "Magic, Science, and Religion." In *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, edited by Robert Redfield, 1–71. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1948.
- McNamer, Sarah. *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- Ogden, Daniel. *Greek and Roman Necromancy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Otto, Bernd-Christian. *Magic: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011.
- Otto, Bernd-Christian and Michael Stausberg, eds. *Defining Magic: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Owen, Alex. *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Pasi, Marco. "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice." In *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, 53–87. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Segal, Alan. "Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition." In *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions: Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, edited by R. van den Broek and Maarten J. Vermaseren, 349–75. Leiden: Brill, 1982.
- Shaw, Gregory. "Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus." *Traditio* 41 (1985): 1–28.
- . *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
- Silva, Francisco. "Mathers' Translation of the *Clavicula Salomonis*: The Relationship Between Translator, Text and Transmission of a 'Religious' Text." PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2009.
- Skemer, Don C. *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
- Taves, Ann. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Thorndike, Lynn. *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*. 8 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–1958.
- Tylor, Edward B. *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*. 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1920.
- Véronèse, Julien. "Magic, Theurgy, and Spirituality in the Medieval Ritual of the *Ars notoria*," translated by Claire Fanger. In *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, edited by Claire Fanger, 3–31. University Park: The Pennsylvania State Uni-

- versity Press, 2012.
- Van Egmond, Daniël. “Western Esoteric Schools in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.” In *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, edited by Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 311–46. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Von Stuckrad, Kocku. “Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations: Tracing the Religious and the Esoteric in Secular Culture.” In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 226–43. Sheffield: Equinox, 2005.
- . *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. London: Equinox, 2005.
- Walker, D.P. *Spiritual & Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.
- Watson, Nicholas. “John the Monk’s *Book of Visions of the Blessed and undefiled Virgin Mary, Mother of God*: Two Versions of a Newly Discovered Ritual Magic Text.” In *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, edited by Claire Fanger, 3–31. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998.
- Yates, Frances A. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.
- . *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.



# Transmutation and Homogenization of Consciousness in Italian Esotericism during the Fascist Period: Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei Maghi* and Julius Evola's *Maschera e Volto dello Spiritualismo Contemporaneo*

Roberto Bacci

E-mail: [roberto\\_bacci@alumni.brown.edu](mailto:roberto_bacci@alumni.brown.edu)

## Abstract

During the 1920s and 1930s the idea of transmutation, so essential to esotericism, was at the core of the Fascist agenda in Italy. Sharing with esotericism a repertoire of myths, symbols and rituals, Fascism aimed to create a new kind of man pushing the individuals to fuse into one radically transformed common consciousness. In order to create the new Italian man, to form and fashion the masses into a homogeneous and compliant collectivity, Fascism disqualified individualistic tendencies: subjects had to integrate into collectivity and only thus attain consciousness of themselves as Italians and as Fascists. While these processes were taking place in society, Italian esotericists continued to elaborate the theme of the transmutation of consciousness. Two books published in Italy in those years significantly warned against the risks that such a transmutation could entail: Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei maghi* (1929) and Julius Evola's *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* (1932). Both these works were harsh critiques of esotericism written by esotericists, as they reviewed the main schools and personalities of the contemporary occult scene with the purpose of demolishing most of them. Starting from very different premises, both Rossi and Evola expressed a deep concern about the self-determination and distinctiveness of individual consciousness, and denounced the possibility that the ideal of the "new man," shared by esotericism and Fascism, could lead to the flattening of the differences among otherwise unique human beings and to the erasure of individual specificity.

## Keywords

Rossi, Mario Manlio; Evola, Julius; transmutation; consciousness; fascism; homogenization

© 2014 Roberto Bacci.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

## Transmutation, Consciousness, Homogenization

A fundamental component of the esoteric form of thought is the idea of transmutation.<sup>1</sup> The term of course derives from alchemy, intended as a system for operating not so much on metals but on human beings: after achieving a special piece of knowledge or going through an exceptional event, the individuals not only transform themselves but become *radically* different from what they were before.<sup>2</sup> As a rule, the experience brings about a crucial change in the interiority of the subjects, in what is sometimes referred to as the *soul*.<sup>3</sup> The discourses on transmutation often incite the individuals to become more aware of who they are, to realize their true nature, to attain or rediscover their authentic self. In this sense, these discourses describe a *metanoia*, a change of mind, a condition in which consciousness drastically shifts to another level. More than consciousness or the soul generically, in these contexts the object of transmutation is *self-consciousness*, the center of individuality, initiative and experience, the awareness of oneself and of one's mental contents, a notion involving a wide range of philosophical and psychological issues, such as memory, intentionality, and the persistence of personal identity over time (and in the course of different lives, when examining the doctrines of reincarnation).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 13. On Faivre's definition of the characteristics of Western esotericism, see: Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5–14; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, trans. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (London: Equinox, 2005), 3–5; Arthur Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 6–10.

<sup>2</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Also in the two main texts that we will analyze in this article the Italian word for "soul" (*anima*) tends to recur in relation to the topic of radical transformation of the interiority of the subject (the authors, it must be noted, were highly aware of the terminology issues related to the idea of consciousness in philosophy and psychology). For example, Mario Manlio Rossi, *Spaccio dei maghi* (Roma: Doxa editrice, 1929), 57–59, 66, 104; Julius Evola, *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo: analisi critica delle principali correnti moderne verso il "sovrannaturale"* (Torino: F.lli Bocca, 1932), 6–19, 50–53, 70–71.

<sup>4</sup> In spite of its intrinsic high degree of ineffability, self-consciousness has been a much-debated theme throughout the centuries. Its definition is made even more complicated by the diverse semantic values that the terms it relates to ("self," "I," etc.) assume in different languages and in different disciplines (philosophy, psychology etc.) Among the scholarly works in English that include a clear overview on the topic, see Brian Garrett, *Personal Identity and Self-Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1998); Genevieve Lloyd, *Being in Time: Selves and Narra-*

The discourses on transmutation concern not only the consciousness of the single individual but also that of collective subjects, when these subjects manifest a unitary character as testified in expressions like *class consciousness* or *national consciousness*.<sup>5</sup> The social and political aspect of the inner change thus comes to the foreground. During the late 1920s and early 1930s – the period on which this study focuses – the idea of transmutation, so essential to esotericism, became extremely important in the vision of the individual and of the collectivity promoted by the Fascist regime in Italy.<sup>6</sup> A crucial aspect of this vision was the creation of a *new man* who would lay the foundation for a new political and social order, a goal that had a tremendous power of fascination for the masses. To this end, Fascism incited individuals to refashion themselves as proud members of the nation, of the state and of the party, and to acquire awareness of their true identity as heirs of a glorious past and heralds of a shining future. The unity of consciousness was an important mission for Fascism, which had inherited from the Risorgimento – the 19th century political and social movement of national independence and unification – the vexed task of “making Italians.”<sup>7</sup> In the context of Europe, Italy was a relatively young nation, built of geographical components that for centuries had remained divided culturally, socially, economically, and linguistically. Fascism wanted to provide the various peoples of Italy with *one* soul in order to establish a society free from interior frictions and conflicts: as members of *one* nation, Italians had to perceive themselves as the *same* people. Clearly

---

*tors in Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). On the idea of consciousness in esotericism at the turn of the 20th century, with repercussions well beyond that period, see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 114–47.

<sup>5</sup> See Mark Evans, “Self-realization,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), 8:632.

<sup>6</sup> Fascism is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that encompasses both individualist and collectivist aspects. As I explain at a later point in the article, I approach Fascism above all as a form of secular, lay, civic, political religion, as understood in the studies by Italian historian Emilio Gentile, particularly in his volume *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). On the relationships between Fascism and esotericism, see note 9.

<sup>7</sup> “We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians” is a famous (and apocryphal) statement generally attributed to Massimo D’Azeglio, one of the leaders of the Risorgimento. On Italy’s nation formation in connection to altered states of consciousness (in particular those induced by hypnotic suggestion), see Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians (1860-1920)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 21–96.

such ideas on transmutation entailed issues of conformity and homogenization, erasure of specificity and flattening of the differences among otherwise unique individuals. In order to create the new man, to mold the masses into a homogeneous and compliant force, Fascism pushed subjects to integrate into the collectivity of the party-state, and only thus attain consciousness of themselves as Italians and as Fascists.<sup>8</sup>

As an object of historical research, during the past thirty years the relationships between esotericism and Nazi-Fascism have increasingly attracted the attention both of specialists and of wider audiences. The early intuitions of George Mosse and pioneer works such as those by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke certainly have stimulated and broadened the interest in the esoteric origins of German Nazism, inspiring analogous inquiries into the Italian situation.<sup>9</sup> In my view, a highly fruitful starting point for analyzing the connections between esotericism and Fascism, with particular reference to the transmutation and homogenization of consciousness, is represented by the works of Emilio Gentile (b. 1946) on the sacralization of politics in Fascist Italy, as they make clear to what extent the regime relied upon the devices of ritual, myth and symbol – important building blocks for the esoteric form of thought – to forge a harmonious collectivity from the heterogeneous and discordant Italian masses.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> “Movements such as Bolshevism, Fascism, and Nazism have affirmed themselves as *political* religions and intensified the aura of the sacred that always surrounds power [...] Through the state or a party they propose to realize a ‘metanoia’ in human nature, whence a ‘new man’ should emerge, regenerated and totally integrated in the community... Once in power, Fascism instituted a lay religion by sacralizing the state and spreading a political cult of the masses that aimed at creating a virile and virtuous citizenry, dedicated body and soul to the nation.” Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 158–59.

<sup>9</sup> See George L. Mosse, “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 1 (1961): 81–96; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany 1890–1935* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985). On esotericism in Italy during the interwar period, and its relationship with Fascism, see Gianfranco de Turrís, ed., *Esoterismo e fascismo: storia, interpretazioni, documenti* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2006); Gian Mario Cazzaniga, ed., *Annali 25: Esoterismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), in particular the essays by Marco Pasi, “Teosofia e antroposofia nell’Italia del primo Novecento,” 569–98, and by Marco Rossi, “Neopaganesimo e arti magiche nel periodo fascista,” 599–628. See also the very recent volume by Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); the book is based on Staudenmaier’s dissertation “Between Occultism and Fascism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race and Nation in Germany and Italy, 1900–1945” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> See especially Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), originally published as *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell’Italia fascista* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993).

Gentile illustrates how Fascism institutionalized a *civic religion* (or lay, secular religion) and attempted to establish, through mass rituals, a *collective cult* for itself.<sup>11</sup> In periods of crisis and tension, civic religion provides the collectivity with a meaning to life in its totality as a way to overcome chaos and increase social stability.<sup>12</sup> It maintains leadership and control over the members of the society mainly through processes of integration of the “other,” and promotes a regeneration of all human beings that belong to its cult. The leaders of the civic religion, “anxious to mold human nature”<sup>13</sup> according to the truth they believe themselves to possess, endeavor to “change the nature of men and women, to create, in a new era of salvation, a ‘new order’ and a ‘new man’.”<sup>14</sup> Although the main focus of Gentile’s analysis is not strictly on the esoteric aspects of the Fascist regime, researchers in esotericism will surely recognize the aspiration under discussion in his pages. The anxiety at stake is one of alchemical transmutation, performed on a mass scale. As Gentile writes, modern political religions “organize collective life as though it were some vast human laboratory in which party and state perform experiments on the body social in order to create the ‘new man’.”<sup>15</sup>

With the aim of bringing individuals to fuse into one common consciousness, Fascism made ample use of standardizing devices, ranging from the black shirts to the synchronized gestures and exercises that were to be performed during parades and other official ceremonies. In order to achieve a homogeneous collectivity, all the distinct components had to conform to the same model. Gentile appropriately speaks of a “molding” of the masses through various forms of mobilization and propaganda (to “forge” and to “mold” were verbs frequently used in the rhetoric of the regime).<sup>16</sup> These mobilizations created a liturgy of “collective harmony” – an expression that Gentile takes from Mussolini himself (*armonico collettivo*) – and constituted one of the most powerful tools of the Fascist propaganda, because through collective rituals the regime managed to transform an “occasional crowd” into a “liturgical mass,” a unanimous worshipping entity made of millions of individuals who were absolutely certain of their consonance of feeling and intent.<sup>17</sup> In an article

---

<sup>11</sup> Gentile, *Sacralization*, 158–59.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–101 (on the “liturgy of collective harmony”), 11 and 94 (“occasional crowd” vs. “liturgical mass”).

published in *Gioventù Fascista* (“Fascist Youth”) in 1932, Massimo Scaligero (1906–1980) – who would become one of Italy’s most renowned Anthroposophists of the 1960s and 1970s – excitedly describes his impressions of one such mass celebration. In his attempt to emphasize the presence of a specific form of self-consciousness in the worshipping crowd, Scaligero implicitly recognizes that a process of homogenization and erasure of identity is actually taking place. His denial signals a challenge, an objection, the site of a struggle:

With Fascism, a crowd has become a harmony of souls [...] This was no crowd misled by demagogic-romantic hallucinations; this was a crowd conscious of itself [...] This was no faceless collectivity [...] not an amorphous mass, but an amalgam of values and fresh intelligences.<sup>18</sup>

An insightful firsthand account by another young author, Giaime Pintor (1919–1943), an anti-Fascist not particularly involved in esoteric matters, is highly revealing of the homogenizing fascination that the collective rituals could induce in their participants. Pintor wrote in his diary about the mass rehearsals in preparation for Hitler’s visit to Rome. Like many young Italians, he had to train for whole days in the suburbs of the capital to learn how to march correctly, in synchrony with other schoolmates:

[...] we intimately penetrated the spectacular complex of totalitarian regimes: we learned to disappear in the thousands and thousands of men who took part in the parades, to walk at the sound of traditional tunes and to get pleasure from the impersonality that the uniform provides.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Massimo Scaligero, “La folla,” *Gioventù fascista*, November 10, 1932, quoted in Gentile, *Sacralization*, 94. For the clarity of my argument, I have modified Botsford’s translation to make it more faithful to the original, albeit less elegant. Original text in Italian: “Con il fascismo la folla è divenuta armonia di anime [...] E non era folla trascinata da allucinazioni di carattere demagogico-romantico, ma quella consapevole di sé [...] Non collettività senza volto [...] non massa amorfa, ma amalgama di valori e di fresche intelligenze.” On Massimo Scaligero, see Massimo Introvigne, “Scaligero, Massimo,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1038–39; Fausto Belfiori, ed., *Massimo Scaligero: il coraggio dell’impossibile* (Teramo: Tilopa, 1982). On the attitude of Scaligero and other Italian Anthroposophists toward the Fascist regime, with particular reference to racial politics, see Peter Staudenmaier, “Between Occultism and Fascism,” 410–99.

<sup>19</sup> Giaime Pintor, *Doppio diario: 1936–1943*, ed. Mirella Serri (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), 38. Translation is mine. See Gentile, *Sacralization* 99 (in Botsford’s translation the sexual implications of Pintor’s word choices for this particular passage are partially lost). Original text in Italian: “[...] penetrammo intimamente nel complesso spettacolare dei regimi totalitari: imparammo a scomparire nelle decine di migliaia di uomini che prendevano parte alle riviste, a cam-

The harmonizing ritual makes the participants vaguely uneasy, but it also generates a pleasure that Pintor describes in terms similar to that of sexual intercourse. Based on thorough and unalterable repetition but meant to produce a spontaneously enthusiastic state of mind, the grandiose mechanism of the parade is at the same time poised and orgiastic, and it works effectively toward the dissolution of specific individuals into an undifferentiated Whole.

While these homogenizing processes were occurring in the society in which they lived, Italian esotericists continued to elaborate the theme of the transmutation of consciousness. What stances did their discourses take on the issue of the specificity and distinctiveness of individual consciousness? Two books on esotericism published in Italy in the Fascist period significantly warned against the risks of homogenization that a radical change of consciousness might induce: Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei maghi* ("Expulsion of the Magicians," 1929) and Julius Evola's *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* ("Mask and Face of Contemporary Spiritualism," 1932).<sup>20</sup> Both of these works have the remarkable characteristic of being harsh critiques of esotericism written by esotericists, who review the main schools and personalities of the contemporary occult scene with the purpose of discrediting most of them. In this sense, the two books function as small polemical encyclopedias of esotericism, and provide a colorful survey of the spiritualist and occult milieus of those years.

The authors of these books are two intellectuals whose influence goes beyond the borders of Italy. Mario Manlio Rossi (1895–1971) was a young scholar at the time, first a pupil of the pragmatist philosopher Mario Calderoni (1879–1914) at the University of Florence, then a devoted Kantian.<sup>21</sup> He was

---

minare al suono di musiche tradizionali e a godere della impersonalità che procura l'uniforme."

<sup>20</sup> The title of Rossi's book echoes Giordano Bruno's *Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante* (1584), generally translated in English as *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, hence my translation as "Expulsion of the Magicians." The general idea that the original title conveys, in regard to esotericism, is that of leave-taking, banishing, discarding. However, the noun *spaccio* and the verb *spacciare* have multiple meanings in contemporary Italian and *spaccio dei maghi* could also indicate, for example, a store that sells a variety of items of small value and dubious provenience (i.e. the magicians). For a more detailed analysis of these works, see Roberto Bacci, "La trasmutazione della coscienza nell'esoterismo italiano del periodo fascista: *Spaccio dei maghi* (1929) di Mario Manlio Rossi e *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* (1932) di Julius Evola" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> On Rossi, see Fiorenzo Fantaccini, "'Dear Mariotto': Lady Gregory and Mario Manlio Rossi," *Roots and Beginnings: Proceedings of the 2nd AISLI Conference, Spilimbergo Palazzo Tadea, 3–6 ottobre 2002*, eds. Pietro Deandrea and Viktoria Tchernichova (Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2003), 285–94; Fiorenzo Fantaccini, *W. B. Yeats e la cultura italiana* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2009): 74–97, 108–11; W. J. McCormack, "We Irish" in *Europe: Yeats, Berkeley and Joseph Hone*

introduced in several esoteric circles by the influential mathematician, pagan and freemason Arturo Reghini (1878–1946). Rossi was also an expert on literature and philosophy of the British Isles, a fact that won him the friendship of the Golden Dawn's W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), Lady Gregory (1852–1932), and other exponents of the Irish Literary Renaissance, whom he personally visited at Coole Park in 1931.<sup>22</sup> During the Fascist period he worked as a high school teacher. Despite his impressive record of scholarly publications he was restricted from teaching at the university, since the regime precluded that possibility to anybody who refused, like Rossi, to become a member of the Fascist National Party. He managed however to be appointed as a visiting faculty member in Germany, lecturing at the universities of Leipzig (1929) and Tübingen (1931). After WWII Rossi taught for two decades at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

The other author I am going to consider, Julius Evola (1898–1974), is probably more familiar to the reader of esoteric texts, being internationally regarded, with René Guénon, as the *maître à penser* of Traditionalism in the

---

(Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010): *passim*; Luciano Mecacci, *Psicologia e psicanalisi nella cultura italiana del Novecento*, 2nd ed. (Roma: Laterza, 1998), 10–13; L[ea] R[ossi], “Biografia carriera e operosità di Mario Manlio Rossi,” *Bollettino storico reggiano* 7, no. 24 (1974): 71–77; Lino Rossi, “Comico e felicità nella psicologia pragmatista di Mario Manlio Rossi,” *Rivista di psicologia* 75, no. 3 (1990): 89–94; Maurizio Torrini, “Mario Manlio Rossi: un ‘irregolare’ nella cultura del Novecento italiano,” in *Un illuminismo scettico: la ricerca filosofica di Antonio Santucci*, eds. Walter Tega and Luigi Turco (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), 97–112. Rich in first-hand anecdotes is the newspaper article by Masolino D’Amico, “Uno scorbutico a caccia di fate,” *La Stampa*, June 6, 2005, sec. Cultura e spettacoli. To Rossi are devoted parts of the very recent book by Luciano Mecacci on the assassination of the philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944): Luciano Mecacci, *La Ghirlanda fiorentina e la morte di Giovanni Gentile* (Milano: Adelphi, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Rossi was invited to Ireland by Joseph Maunsell Hone to co-write a book on George Berkeley, published with an introduction by Yeats: Joseph M. Hone, and Mario Manlio Rossi, *Bishop Berkeley: His Life, Writings, and Philosophy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1931). Through Hone, Rossi became friends with the intellectuals of the Irish Literary Revival, especially Lady Gregory and Yeats. Within a few months Rossi wrote a book on his Irish experience: Mario Manlio Rossi, *Viaggio in Irlanda* (Milano: Doxa, 1932). An abridged English version of the volume was published shortly after: *Pilgrimage in the West* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1933). Years later, Rossi wrote an essay about his conversations with Yeats at Coole Park: Mario Manlio Rossi, “Yeats and Philosophy,” *Cronos* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1947): 19–24. Part of Rossi’s essay can also be read in Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats, 1865–1939*, reissued (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 422–23. Letters of Rossi to Yeats are published in Richard J. Finneran, George Mills Harper, and William M. Murphy, eds., *Letters to W. B. Yeats*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); letters of Yeats to Rossi are included in Allan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1954).

20th century.<sup>23</sup> Evola started his career as a Dadaist painter, and then turned to philosophy and esotericism. His political views – strongly marked by the Traditionalist perspective – were more radically right wing than those of Fascism, with which he had a complicated relationship. Like Rossi, but for quite different reasons, Evola never became a member of the Fascist party or an exponent of the Fascist academic intelligentsia. He did, however, write several articles for journals that were published under the direction of influential party officials, and his racial theories were met for some time with interest by the regime.

Through the accounts, analysis and evaluations contained in Rossi's and Evola's books, we can appreciate how rich and multifaceted the debate on the transmutation of consciousness was during the interwar period both in Italy and abroad. Differences of views emerge, but also a shared anxiety for the risks that a radical change in human beings could involve.

### Expulsion of the Magicians

Upon reading her friend Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei maghi* (1929), Lady Gregory was so deeply impressed that she wanted to translate the book for Yeats. Her death from cancer in 1932 prevented her from starting the project.<sup>24</sup> It is indeed a compelling and intense book; it constitutes the corrosive and irreverent farewell of the author in his mid-thirties to his earlier passion for the occult.<sup>25</sup> No esoteric movement or personality is spared by Rossi's well-argued, derisive prose. The form and the style are more characteristic of a pamphlet

---

<sup>23</sup> Evola was a very prolific author. For a bibliography of his writings see Renato Del Ponte, "Julius Evola: Una bibliografia 1920–1994," *Futuro Presente* 6 (1995): 28–70. The list of critical studies on his thought would also be too long; unfortunately many of these studies are extremely biased politically in one direction or the other. In the past decade, however, a number of fairly unprejudiced and valuable academic works have been published. To mention but a few of them: Francesco Cassata, *A destra del fascismo: profilo politico di Julius Evola* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, *Julius Evola: dal dadaismo alla rivoluzione conservatrice, 1919–1940* (Roma: Aracne, 2001); Francesco Germinario, *Razza del sangue, razza dello spirito: Julius Evola, l'antisemitismo e il nazionalsocialismo, 1930–43* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001). For a preliminary introduction in English to Evola (with bibliography) see Hans Thomas Hakl, "Evola, Giulio Cesare (Julius or Jules)," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 345–50; Hans Thomas Hakl, "Julius Evola and the UR Group," *Aries* 12, no.1 (2012): 53–90.

<sup>24</sup> Fantaccini, "Dear Mariotto," 290.

<sup>25</sup> Mario Manlio Rossi, *Spaccio dei maghi* (Roma: Doxa editrice, 1929). All translations from the book are mine.

than a systematic treatise. The arguments are kept lively by the many autobiographical anecdotes about the times when Rossi as a young man frequented futurist, occultist and spiritualist milieus in Florence, under the guidance of his more experienced friend Arturo Reghini. Now that Kant's philosophy had rescued Rossi from the muddle of spiritualism,<sup>26</sup> the hour had come for him to expose and debunk the youthful illusions of esoteric wisdom. This is the origin and purpose of *Spaccio dei maghi*, as its author states clearly from the beginning.<sup>27</sup>

Rossi touches on the problem of the distinctiveness of individual consciousness in several occasions throughout *Spaccio dei maghi*. For instance, questioning the doctrine of reincarnation embraced by the Blavatskian Theosophists, he identifies one of its major flaws in the fact that the consciousness of personal identity does not persist from one life into the next one. The new existence is a continuation of the preceding one, but it is also distinct from it, so how can consciousness be “at the same time *identical* and *different*” in the two lives? Rossi points out that there cannot be various self-consciousnesses in one single being. Self-consciousness is incompatible with a state of multiplicity and diversity from itself: an “I” cannot be an “other.”<sup>28</sup> In another passage, criticizing Rudolf Steiner's claim that self-consciousness can be grasped by intuition, Rossi turns to Kant in order to explain that knowing the “other” as different from “me” is the only way to achieve consciousness of oneself.<sup>29</sup>

It is however in the discussion of initiation and ritual magic that Rossi's views on the relationship between transmutation and homogenization of consciousness emerge most clearly. Rossi remarks that there is a “social aspect” in magic.<sup>30</sup> In spite of the conceited individualism of the initiated and their tendency to present their ideas as the result of ineffable individual experiences, the self-styled magicians search to connect through ages and places, organizing themselves in a sort of mystical church. The “social aspect” of magic, however, is for Rossi in sharp contrast with the “absolute solipsism”

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14. Rossi compares spiritualism to a “strange” and “absurd” “mental disease” that is born of ignorance (more specifically: ignorance in the field of philosophy) and produces confusion.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 15. Rossi refers in particular to Kant's *Die Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch die Träume der Metaphysik* (“Dreams of a Spirit Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics,” 1766), in which the German philosopher discusses Emanuel Swedenborg's conceptions of the spirits and the afterlife.

<sup>28</sup> Rossi, *Spaccio*, 54–57.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 62–67.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 92.

of the magicians and the “a-historical” nature of their knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Initiation is based on experiences that are personal and incommunicable, and a community cannot be built of such foundations. At best, such a community will have a funereal character: “a church is not a linear juxtaposition of the faithful, but a living organism, in which flows the living blood of social communication. The magical tradition, on the contrary, has a mummified, almost repulsive, look.”<sup>32</sup> It is the ritual, and not the living relationship among the members of a community, that keeps the group of initiated together. Rossi tends to depict the initiated as dehumanized beings, almost walking corpses, strangers to one another and dependent on a leader – *il Maestro* – who does not show signs of having a specific identity either. In time, master and disciple will become “indistinguishable” from each other: because the magical tradition is “absolute and immutable,” when the disciple has received the initiation he is “absolutely equal to the master.”<sup>33</sup>

Rossi directs his attack at the ritualistic aspect of initiatory magic, an area in which Reghini and Evola were prominent figures. Quite surprisingly, given the elitist character of such esoteric groups, Rossi condemns magic as a “democratic” practice that depersonalizes individuals in the homogenizing mechanism of the ritual, which is the “ultimate essence” of magic itself. Magic is, above anything else, ritual.<sup>34</sup> For Rossi, this idea serves as the starting point to prove that magicians’ individualism is only illusory. In magic, rituals do not vary much according to the different schools. The ritual has value independently of the dogma on which it is supposedly founded: “Praxis transcends theory.”<sup>35</sup> The magician is different from the common people not because he has learned doctrinal knowledge, but because he has acquired an instrument. Behind the veil of individualism, its opposite looms – a reality of homogenizing egalitarianism:

If magical knowledge *arises* autonomously, always the same, in each initiate that performs the ritual, then what becomes of the rumored magical “individualism”? It turns into the beautiful assertion (democratic, egalitarian also in metaphysics – and in meta-metaphysics!) that “all men are equal.”

Equal, provided that they perform the magic ritual. There are blind people, who cannot see... But they are blind not due to their human essence, but because they refuse to get educated [...]

Let’s assume that some magicians claim that there are different ranks among

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 92–93.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 94–95.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 100–107.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 101–102.

men: some of them more capable of initiation, others less so. – But among those who are capable, there is no longer any difference! *None whatsoever!* They all know the same things, they all think the same stuff, and all of them do this *in the same manner*. They are individuals just because they are atoms. Not because they are *persons*.<sup>36</sup>

Magic does not guarantee a diversification of individuals on the basis of an intrinsic “human essence.” On the contrary, it brings about a complete flattening of the personality in those who let themselves be indoctrinated. With initiation to magic ritual, individuals find themselves deprived of their autonomy, of the very possibility to think differently from others. In Rossi’s discourse, the initiated appear as creatures lacking a consciousness of their own. In this perspective, the refusal to get “educated” is implicitly charged with a positive value of humanity and life. Crossing the threshold of the Temple, where the society of magicians gathers, one finds a gray and spectral atmosphere.<sup>37</sup> The homogeneity of consciousness creates an unsettling picture:

Beyond that famous door there are no longer faces of men. In the Temple there are absolutely undifferentiated units: you can tell one from the other only (and vaguely... since consciousness is no longer what distinguishes a human being) by a name. Why not a number then? – That which distinguishes them has remained *on this side* of the door. Their way of reasoning, of seeing, of living [...] disappears with the initiation. [...] Their reality as magicians, their superior consciousness (“*sit venia verbis...*”) is absolutely undifferentiated.<sup>38</sup>

The magicians are victims of a “depersonalizing ideal.”<sup>39</sup> Identical one to the other, serialized like automata or prison inmates, they want to “swallow” the others, reducing them to their own state of “undifferentiated consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> Unlike philosophy and art, which can become part of individuals without destroying “their unmistakable peculiarity,”<sup>41</sup> magic deprives its practitioners of their uniqueness:

[Magicians] have wanted to be immortal *in actuality*, instead of limiting themselves

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 103–104.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. In the original Italian text: “ideale ‘spersonalizzante’.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 104–105. Original: “la loro coscienza [...] è assolutamente indifferenziata” (104).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 105. Original: “inconfondibile peculiarità.”

to praying: “In dissolutione formae specificaе salva animam.” And their wish has been granted: now they fear that their own person drowns into magic! And because on the other side of the Sublime Gate they are all equal and identical, they want the others to be equal and identical to them. [...]

They want to assimilate the others to themselves. [...]

The magician [...] precisely because he *surpasses* the humanity of others, he negates *also* his own. The theory swallows and digests man: after that, nothing is left but little dark things, all looking alike...<sup>42</sup>

However one wants to interpret the “little dark things, all looking alike”<sup>43</sup> – whether one sees in them simply the initiated in ceremonial aprons, or the vile final products of digestion, or the black-shirted Fascists, depersonalized and dehumanized in the liturgy of collective harmony – it is clear that for Rossi the original impulse of magicians to differentiate themselves by asserting their superiority gets ironically perverted in a “mechanical” process, founded on ritual, that transforms a society of aspiring self-proclaimed super-men into a foul, anonymous assembly of dark uniforms.<sup>44</sup>

Rossi relates the desire to be different from others and the impulse to make others identical to oneself. His discourse is a warning against the reduction of the different into the same, of the specific into the indistinct. This process takes place more easily when the state of consciousness is lowered and, once it has been set in motion, it functions as a type of automatism: “Magic is practice not theory, ie. ritual not dogma [...] Magic is a pure mechanics, it works the soul (and nature) as unformed, or uniform, non-individualized matter: ‘Do like this and this, folks, and *whoever you are*, you will become this and this.’”<sup>45</sup> Because in magic practice precedes theory, nobody, not even the masters of a group, know in advance the ruinous consequences of the ritual. Rossi underlines the irresponsibility of leaders who deceive subjects into believing that by performing ceremonies together they will achieve a “magic hyper-consciousness” which will make them superior to others. In reality – argues Rossi – what they will obtain is a state of dull mediocrity, which stands in ironic contrast to the elitist stance of magicians: “*Ritual is the true magic*. And therefore magic is leveling; it’s the true democracy of the spirit.”<sup>46</sup>

When ritual is devoid of dogma, when practice is independent from doc-

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 104–105.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Original: “cosini tutti bruni, tutti uguali uno all’altro” (105).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 105–106. On magic ritual as “mechanical” process.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 107.

trine, the result is an unsettling combination of haughty *superomismo* and conformity. Rossi derisively portrays the magician, because of his firm belief of having stolen something from God, as a modern Prometheus in uniform, guiltily hiding his little spark “in the same way a boarding school boy would hide his cigarette.”<sup>47</sup> The magician only apparently breaks the norm; he actually gets sucked into an even sneakier form of conformity of which he is unaware. This happens also to occultists of the “intellectual” type (Rossi includes in this category Novalis, Hermann Keyserling, Julius Evola, and Arturo Reghini), who are familiar with philosophy and have read Kant but nevertheless slip down into the regions of magic and mysticism. These occultists pursue an aristocratic “palingenesis” founded on the principles of differentiation and superiority, but involuntarily end up promoting depersonalizing and homogenizing ideals.<sup>48</sup>

As Rossi sees it, the attainment of a state of super-consciousness is a pitiable blunder. It is part of a larger collection of fascinating but ultimately deceptive notions, through which human beings delude themselves into believing that they have the ability to surmount the limits inscribed in their own nature.<sup>49</sup> Yet from those constraints nobody can escape. The refusal to accept their limits and the incapacity to embrace “rational uncertainty” as the most correct attitude toward existence lead esotericists to negate instead of affirm the value of human beings as individuals with their own unique consciousness.<sup>50</sup> The life of magicians will be dreary, deathlike, dull: “Everything will be the same [...] all even, all equal, all without relief.”<sup>51</sup>

## Mask and Face of Contemporary Spiritualism

*Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* by Julius Evola was published three years after *Spaccio dei maghi*, in 1932.<sup>52</sup> This work also belongs to a class of polemical texts in which an esotericist assesses, and mostly rebukes, a variety

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 146–148.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 150–152.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>52</sup> Julius Evola, *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo: analisi critica delle principali correnti moderne verso il “sovrannaturale”* (Torino: Einaudi, 1932). The present study focuses on the Fascist period and therefore refers exclusively to this first edition of the book. In the course of the years, Evola expanded and revised the text several times; the English versions are generally based on later editions. Here all translations are mine from the 1932 Italian original.

of currents and doctrines within esotericism itself. Compared to Rossi's book, *Maschera e volto* is more systematic and follows a less extemporary vein in the sequence of topics and arguments, in spite of the fact that most of its chapters had been previously published as journal articles.<sup>53</sup> Rossi's work displays the irreverent exuberance of a pamphlet; Evola's book aspires to the more solemn form of a treatise. Evola knew *Spaccio dei maghi*, in which his doctrines were also criticized, but he does not mention Rossi's volume in *Maschera e volto*. His main points of reference seem to be instead the much admired works by René Guénon, *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion* (1921) and *L'erreur spirite* (1923), with which Evola had great familiarity.<sup>54</sup> Unlike Rossi, Evola attacks particular aspects of the variegated world of esotericism from a position that still remains within the confines of esotericism itself: it is the perennialist-traditionalist perspective that functions for him, as for Guénon, as the touchstone for evaluating validity in the doctrines he discusses.

Evola's condemnation of spiritualism does not originate from a disillusioned skepticism. He attacks the spiritualist doctrines as an actual danger, not just a harmless cultural attitude. These doctrines attract and set in motion real forces that have devastating effects on human consciousness. Their action is comparable to that of demonic possession in Catholicism and causes people to lose their "soul," their "unity," their "self-awareness."<sup>55</sup> The "spiritual" in this perspective corresponds to the "demonic" (Evola employs this term mostly in the sense given to it by Paul Tillich in *Das Dämonische*, 1926) or the "natural" (or "pre-natural"): a formless and impersonal force that generally has no intentionality of its own and disintegrates anything that has "form" in human beings, and notably the "personality."<sup>56</sup> The "demonic" can access and damage

---

<sup>53</sup> Some chapters appeared in Evola's journal *La Torre* in 1930. See *La Torre: foglio di espressioni varie e di tradizione una*, reprint, with an introduction by Marco Tarchi (Milano: Il Falco, 1977): 301–11, 321–28, 372–79. *La Torre* – arguably the most political of the journals directed by Evola in the interwar period – had a short life, from February to June 1930, when the Fascist authorities put a stop to its publication.

<sup>54</sup> See René Guénon, *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion* (Paris: Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1921); René Guénon, *L'erreur spirite* (Paris: M. Rivière, 1923). Quite curiously Evola was thirty-four years old when *Maschera e volto* was published; the same age as Rossi when *Spaccio dei maghi* came out. Guénon was thirty-five at the time of *Le Théosophisme*. Inebriated by the correspondences, a student of esoteric matters might be tempted to conjecture the existence of a midlife syndrome that induces many esotericists in their mid-thirties to critically assess the range of doctrines which contributed to form them as intellectuals.

<sup>55</sup> Evola, *Maschera*, 1–6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. On the issue of the "demonic," Evola, the proponent of pagan imperialism, declares to be substantially in agreement with the views expressed by Paul Tillich, the protes-

individuals more easily when they lower their level of consciousness, i.e. when they regress from a condition of “formed personal consciousness” to one of “sub-consciousness.” When human beings are in this latter state, they quit experiencing “nature” as something external to themselves, as “not-I.”<sup>57</sup> This is the end of the “person,” and the threshold of the “impersonal,” of the “natural.” There is an inescapable cause-effect relationship between lowering the level of consciousness and depersonalization: whoever “opens himself passively,” “ecstatically” to nature and to the realm of the spiritual will end up having his personal identity weakened and harmed. For Evola, authentic spirituality is always characterized by clear self-awareness, which is the only trait that elevates man above other beings. Trance, hypnosis, ecstasy and all states of diminished consciousness entail a movement downward, not upward, in the ladder of beings.<sup>58</sup>

Evola maintains that the transmutation of human beings must be finalized to a state of “super-consciousness”: this is the true direction toward the supernatural, the path that was known by Traditional civilizations as “asceticism.”<sup>59</sup> In *Spaccio dei maghi*, Rossi illustrated how magicians surrender their personal identity through the “mechanical” fascination of ritual, an inexorable though imperceptible process; in *Maschera e volto*, Evola repeatedly describes the obliteration of individual personality as something that takes place when the unaware subject is in a state of lowered consciousness. Evola’s discourse on the right attitude toward transmutation, consciousness and the supernatural draws very sharp demarcations. On the one hand, we have the positive pole of the authentically “supernatural”: awareness of oneself, individualized personality, ascent from consciousness to super-consciousness. On the other hand, we have the negative pole of “nature”: lowering or total loss of self-awareness, annihilation of individual personality, descent from consciousness to “sub-consciousness.”<sup>60</sup>

Therefore it is not surprising that Evola denounces the practice of mediumship both in spiritual séances and in the experiments of psychical researchers. Mediumship constitutes a real danger because, by lowering the subject’s level of consciousness, it puts the sub-personal forces in the condition to shatter the formed personality. Due to the fact that many people practice medium-

---

tant theologian close to socialist ideals. See Paul Tillich, *Das Dämonische: Ein Beitrag zur Sinn-  
deutung der Geschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr 1926).

<sup>57</sup> Evola, *Maschera*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. In the original Italian text: “supercoscienza” (super-consciousness) and “asceti” (asceticism).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-12. Original: “subcoscienza” (sub-consciousness), 8.

ship around the globe, all of humanity is exposed to the risk of a “psychic infection” transmitted by “obscure and impersonal forces.”<sup>61</sup> In Evola’s text a relation steadily takes shape between two semantic fields that comprise words referring, on the one hand, to the loss of individual specificity (“impersonal,” “collective,” etc.), and on the other, to the altered states of consciousness (“ecstasy,” “trance,” etc.). Obsession, for example, is one of the most pervasive manners in which the forces of the spiritual world annihilate the specificity of the individual:

The free person is imperceptibly replaced by something that, without letting the coercion be noticed, constrains and perverts any superior aspiration. The personal principle, being mutilated, “ecstatically” recedes in the collective – and the collective, the unformed psychical, eminently displays the “demonic” invasion and destruction.<sup>62</sup>

And it does not matter whether mediumistic phenomena are caused by “external agents” (e.g., the spirits of the dead) or by “sub-conscious elements” in living human beings, because the “sub-conscious” belongs to the sphere of the “sub-personal.”<sup>63</sup>

In the political religion of Italian Fascism the rituals revolving around the dead had a crucial homogenizing function. The cult of the fallen was widely employed by the regime to this end. The soldiers killed in WWI and the “martyrs” who gave their lives for the Fascist cause were regularly celebrated in mass rituals. These ceremonies usually involved some form of roll call of the dead, an emotionally intense experience for the participants. Typically the leader celebrating the ritual called out the name of the dead and the crowd replied in unison identifying itself, as a whole, with the deceased person. The ritual served the purpose of integrating individuals into the group, inspiring in them the feeling of belonging to a community that reached beyond earthly life.<sup>64</sup> In *Maschera e volto* Evola does not explicitly deal with the Fascist rituals connected to the cult of the fallen. However, his views on the evocation of spiritual forces appear in clear contrast with the conceptions of the dead and their function in creating social cohesion and political consent that were at the basis of these ceremonies. Evola claims that it is not possible to summon

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 18. Original: “subpersonale” (sub-personal).

<sup>64</sup> See Gentile, *Sacralization*, 26–27, 66–67, 116–17.

the spirits of the dead individually by name. The realm of the dead is one of chaotic impersonality, a restless whirl of impulses and forces beyond the control of a single consciousness. Only a few superior individuals become immortal after leaving their physical body, but in general the dead don't have "spiritual unity": they are "decomposition products" of the soul, muddled compounds of "deindividuated psychic waste."<sup>65</sup> Far from the Fascist celebrations of the fallen martyrs, Evola conceives the deceased as impersonal energies that infect the living with their lack of individual specificity. Evola's discourse depicts the spiritual plan as an insidious dominion permeated by chaotic and shapeless drives which disorient man and ravage everything in him that is form and uniqueness: a triumph of the collective over the individual.<sup>66</sup>

Evola's criticism does not spare Blavatskian "Theosophism" and its dissident offshoots, the doctrines of Rudolf Steiner and Jiddu Krishnamurti.<sup>67</sup> In these cases too, Evola advocates the idea of consciousness as "one" in the sense that it is unique and specific, the result of a process of individuation; meanwhile he censures Theosophy because it promotes a model of "oneness" in the sense of a collective entity, resulting from leveling the differences into a homogeneous totality.<sup>68</sup> According to Evola, Theosophy correctly sets as a goal for the individual the achievement of an "independent self-consciousness," but then it gets side-tracked by the typically British anti-aristocratic notion of "social collective progress" – a spiritual evolution across the ages involving all human beings indiscriminately – and ends up promoting an ideal of unity understood as immanence of the "One Life" in every being.<sup>69</sup> In Evola's view, the "One Life" should be the point of departure and not of arrival in the transmutation of consciousness. The "One Life" is the "undifferentiated substrate" starting from which each being, forming itself, builds its own "qualification"; it is not – as the Theosophists misunderstand it – a final state of perfection in which distinct individuals dissolve themselves, losing their identity in a pantheistic fusion with the Whole.<sup>70</sup> This mistake of the Theosophists is yet another aspect of their tendency to encourage undifferentiated states of being and uphold "semi-communistic ideals" of "equality, universal solidarity, leveling of sexes and classes" instead of pursuing the Traditional "virile law

---

<sup>65</sup> Evola, *Maschera*, 19–22.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–24.

<sup>67</sup> See *ibid.*, 41–42, on the distinction between "Ancient and Traditional Theosophy" and "Anglo-Indian Theosophy" (or "Theosophism").

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–57.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

of hierarchy, difference, and caste.”<sup>71</sup> In this sense, Theosophy contributes to pushing the crisis of modern civilizations even further “into the collective, the promiscuous.”<sup>72</sup>

The doctrines of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) give Evola the opportunity to discuss the notions of ecstasy, mysticism, and messianism, with particular regard to the risks of losing one’s specificity that are implied in them. These concepts also played an important role in the political religion of Mussolini’s regime, which explicitly referred to a *mistica fascista* (Fascist mysticism) and heavily relied on the personality cult of the *Duce*. Krishnamurti had been chosen at a very young age by the leaders of the Theosophical Society as a sort of messiah. He renounced that role in 1929, dissolving the organization that the Theosophists had created for him (the *Order of the Star*) to continue his path in a more personal way. For Evola, this is a step in the right direction, but the fundamental inclination of Krishnamurti’s doctrine remains unchanged. His teachings are a contemporary example of “mysticism,” a form of spiritualism based on ecstasy, on the “personality going out of itself.”<sup>73</sup> Ecstasy results in the loss of one’s individuality, as the mystic is absorbed into an incommensurably vaster entity like God, Nature, or – in Krishnamurti’s case – Life. For Evola, what makes the idea of ecstasy even more dangerous is that it generates a form of pleasure, of “enjoyment” (*godimento*, the same sexually-charged term that Pintor uses to describe the feeling of impersonality derived from wearing a uniform); and this pleasure may become an end in itself.<sup>74</sup> Mysticism for Evola is a “sentimental or passional state,” entailing passivity and self-bewilderment, and is associated with “a contempt for the autonomous personality.”<sup>75</sup> In the “mystical identification,” people deviate from the task of forming themselves as unique individuals: instead of pursuing their own inner completion, they identify with an “object” or an “ideal.”<sup>76</sup> This mystical object fascinates people, who “go out of themselves” (ecstasy) and thus get the impression of having been “freed” from themselves, hence a pleasurable feeling of release, of *détente*.<sup>77</sup> But this is a fake freedom; it is actually subjugation to the object with which one identifies. The resulting pleasure is a pleasure of slaves. Moreover,

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 57–58.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Pintor uses the infinitive of the verb (*godere*: “to enjoy,” “to get pleasure”) and Evola uses the noun derived from the verb (*godimento*: “enjoyment,” “pleasure”). See note 19.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 77.

this process is not necessarily caused by a religious experience, because there is also “a mysticism of profane things,” like “a political party or a sport.”<sup>78</sup> Evola does not refer explicitly to Fascism. However, the fact that his remarks were written in times of censorship and mass enthusiasm for a charismatic leader allows the reader to see Fascism, especially in its collectivist aspect, as a possible “object” capable of setting off the mystical fascination which brings about secular ecstasy and loss of the self.

In Evola’s view, messianism can be considered as a particular case of mysticism.<sup>79</sup> A spiritual leader like Krishnamurti or Rudolf Steiner can cause disciples to derail in their process of forming a unique personality; he can make disciples identify with him as a collective entity, and enslave them by means of a fascination that they perceive as pleasure-inducing freedom. Very rarely – warns Evola – the messiah is a truly superior being, capable of guiding individuals in forming their own identity. Most often, the “messianic phenomenon” produces “collective entities of an irrational nature, that replace single individuals and make use of their energies for something like their incarnation and nutrition.”<sup>80</sup> Evola favorably considers the fact that Krishnamurti’s idea of transmutation is oriented toward the attainment of “unconditioned awareness,” the expression of “the eternal I,” and the recuperation of “individual uniqueness.”<sup>81</sup> However, Evola objects that Krishnamurti is absolutely wrong in equating “the eternal I” with “Life,” a mistake that makes him conceive the realization of a person’s most authentic identity in a pantheistic fashion.<sup>82</sup> The “self” that Krishnamurti wants to realize is “the I of everything, the absolute unity with all things, [...] undifferentiated, proteiform life.”<sup>83</sup> Any sign of individual specificity is erased. In opposition to this view, Evola exalts an ascetic-alchemical teaching which aims at refining the inner core of individuality as a grain of pure gold. Transmutation – states Evola – must always proceed from “formless universality” to “formed individuality” and not the other way around.<sup>84</sup>

*Maschera e volto* does not only challenge and criticize other viewpoints. It also contains a few sections in which the author openly declares his admiration for other esotericists whose views he considers correct. Besides Guénon, Evola holds in high regard Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), Giuliano Kremmerz

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 76–77.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 77–78.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 79–80.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 80–81.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 86.

(1861–1930), Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932) and, to a lesser extent, Hermann Keyserling (1880–1946). These authors – roughly corresponding to the figures that Rossi classifies as magicians of the “intellectual” type – are for Evola the exponents of authentic magic, of a “metaphysical attitude” oriented toward the “supernormal integration of the personality.”<sup>85</sup> They nourish an “ideal of independence” and set as a goal for man a higher level of consciousness, a “super-personality” that transcends physical death and is in opposition to all the elements that are ephemeral in a person.<sup>86</sup> Their teachings, which are all expressions of the one Tradition, promote an “awakening” that is transmutation of the self into a completely formed and super-conscious individuality, not the dissolution of the unique individual into an undifferentiated Whole. The “discipline of magic” aspires to “freeing from the stratum of the collective an independent personal principle.”<sup>87</sup> Evola describes this path of transmutation as “magical asceticism,” the “discipline intending to form a spiritual unity, an authentic personality instead of the insubstantial and exterior one that is created by social conventions, upbringing, environment, heredity.”<sup>88</sup> The process is one of subtraction, a deliberate “taking form” of the individual through a “disrobing” of the self, a removal from oneself of all that does not belong to the true essence of the personality.<sup>89</sup> One of the ways to achieve this condition is the magic ritual. Evola clarifies that the forces evoked in ceremonial magic are not necessarily “determined by a collectivity, or condensed in a collectivity”;<sup>90</sup> the real magician knows how to recognize, discriminate and direct these forces, and distinguish between the real self and the illusory (and often frightening) double that ritual tends to generate, and therefore he is able to preserve and strengthen his own personality.<sup>91</sup>

Consistent with the Traditionalist perspective, Evola deems the conditions of contemporary society to be extremely unfavorable to the realization of a super-personality or super-consciousness.<sup>92</sup> In the present situation, in the “age of the demonic collective” – as Evola defines it, employing an expression (*demonia del collettivo*) that is sharply in contrast with the “collective harmony” (*armonico collettivo*) envisioned by Mussolini – too many forces hinder man in this achieve-

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 110–11. Original: “integrazione soprannormale della personalità,” 111.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 111–16. Original: “superpersonalità,” 116.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 34–35.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 115–16.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 119–20.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 126–28.

ment.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, this type of transmutation is an “aristocratic right,” reserved for a precious few. The others can only be misled by contemporary spiritualism into an increasingly ruinous state of sub-personality and sub-consciousness.<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

The reading of *Spaccio dei Maghi* and *Maschera e volto* shows how the debate on the transmutation of consciousness generated fiery controversies, but also subtle convergences, among esotericists on the possible risks that such transmutation could imply for a society ruled by a regime that was charging the old alchemical ideal of the “new man” with further values and implications. When the transmutation of consciousness is intended as movement not toward the consolidation of the core of personality but toward the creation of the common soul for all the individuals in a collectivity, Fascism and some sectors of esotericism (not necessarily the most obvious ones from a political perspective) seem to go out of tune with each other. Starting from very different premises, both Rossi and Evola warn against a view of transmutation in which individuals cannot realize themselves in their own specific manner, independent from the influence of the group and its leaders. For the two authors, it is important that individuals maintain their autonomy in the course of the profound modifications they undergo, not letting themselves be absorbed by an external agency that obliterates their specificity. Rossi and Evola denounce a type of transmutation that creates an undifferentiated consciousness. While discussing matters that seem to pertain strictly to the debates within esotericism, they express a deep concern about the molding of souls performed in the society around them, and warn against the possibility that the ideal of the “new man,” shared by esotericism and Fascism, leads to the erasure of individual distinctiveness. In regard to Fascism, the denunciation remains mostly implicit, indirect, made of hints and allusions, as one may expect from authors writing in a totalitarian regime. What they criticize is not a political organization but the underlying structure of a project, the *forma mentis* it implies, and the mechanisms it could set off. *Spaccio dei maghi* and *Maschera e volto* do not depict esotericism as a form of thought that challenges the authority of Fascism or as a subversive and heretical discipline that is antagonistic to the dominant

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 126.

ideology.<sup>95</sup> Instead, they convey a subtle awareness that the approach of some sectors of esotericism to individual transmutation as dissolution of personal identity may not be too different from the changes that were taking place on a collective level in Italy under Fascism.

Issues of homogenization and conformity tend to manifest themselves more clearly in societies that are ruled by totalitarian regimes, but they are not exclusive to those societies. Trying to answer the questions raised by the discourses elaborated during Fascism can help us to understand what kind of relationships exist between the incitation to radically change one's consciousness and the socio-political pressure toward standardization that is also at work in cultures that present themselves as free, liberal and democratic. Because of its hardwired concern with the transmutation of human consciousness, esotericism seems more predisposed than other modes of thought to discern the possible consequences of the crucial adjustments that are expected from subjects in a society in search of its soul, the one and same soul for all its members.

## Bibliography

- Bacci, Roberto. "La trasmutazione della coscienza nell'esoterismo italiano del periodo fascista: *Spaccio dei maghi* (1929) di Mario Manlio Rossi e *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* (1932) di Julius Evola." PhD diss., Brown University, 2012.
- Belfiori, Fausto, ed. *Massimo Scaligero: il coraggio dell'impossibile*. Teramo: Tilopa, 1982.
- Cassata, Francesco. *A destra del fascismo: profilo politico di Julius Evola*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003.
- Cazzaniga, Gian Mario, ed. *Annali 25: Esoterismo*. Torino: Einaudi, 2010.
- Chiantera-Stutte, Patricia. *Julius Evola: dal dadaismo alla rivoluzione conservatrice, 1919–1940*. Roma: Aracne, 2001.
- D'Amico, Masolino. "Uno scorbutico a caccia di fate." *La Stampa*, June 6, 2005, sec. Cultura e spettacoli.
- Del Ponte, Renato. "Julius Evola: Una bibliografia 1920–1994." *Futuro Presente* 6 (1995): 28–70.
- De Turrís, Gianfranco, ed. *Esoterismo e fascismo: storia, interpretazioni, documenti*. Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2006.
- Evans, Mark. "Self-realization." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig. Vol. 3. London-New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Evola, Julius. *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo: analisi critica delle principali correnti moderne verso il "sovranaturale"*. Torino: Flli Bocca, 1932.
- Faivre, Antoine. *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

---

<sup>95</sup> On the dynamic interplay of orthodoxy and heresy in the discourses of Western esotericism, see Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad, eds., *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

- Fantaccini, Fiorenzo. *W. B. Yeats e la cultura italiana*. Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2009.
- . “‘Dear Mariotto’: Lady Gregory and Mario Manlio Rossi.” In *Roots and Beginnings: Proceedings of the 2nd AISLI Conference, Spilimbergo Palazzo Tadea, 3–6 ottobre 2002*, edited by Pietro Deandrea and Viktoria Tchernichova, 285–94. Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2003.
- Finneran, Richard J., George Mills Harper, and William M. Murphy, eds. *Letters to W. B. Yeats*. Vol. 2. London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.
- Garrett, Brian. *Personal Identity and Self-Consciousness*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Gentile, Emilio. *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*. Translated by Keith Botsford. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996. Originally published as *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993).
- Germinario, Francesco. *Razza del sangue, razza dello spirito: Julius Evola, l'antisemitismo e il nazional-socialismo, 1930–43*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001.
- Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *The Occult Roots of Nazism: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany 1890–1935*. Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985.
- Guénon, René. *L'erreur spirite*. Paris: M. Rivière, 1923.
- . *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion*. Paris: Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1921.
- Hakl, Hans Thomas. “Julius Evola and the UR Group.” *Aries*, 12, no. 1 (2012): 53–90.
- . “Evola, Giulio Cesare (Julius or Jules).” In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 345–50. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Hammer, Olav, and Kocku von Stuckrad, eds. *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J., ed. *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Hone, Joseph. *W. B. Yeats, 1865–1939*. Reissued. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.
- Hone, Joseph M., and Mario Manlio Rossi. *Bishop Berkeley: His Life, Writings, and Philosophy*. London: Faber & Faber, 1931.
- Introvigne, Massimo. “Scaligero, Massimo.” In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 1038–39. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- La Torre: foglio di espressioni varie e di tradizione una*. Reprint. Milano: Il Falco, 1977.
- Lloyd, Genevieve. *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Mecacci, Luciano. *La Ghirlanda fiorentina e la morte di Giovanni Gentile*. Milano: Aldephi, 2014.
- . *Psicologia e psicanalisi nella cultura italiana del Novecento*. 2nd ed. Roma: Laterza, 1998.
- Mosse, George L. “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 1 (1961): 81–96.
- Owen, Alex. *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Pasi, Marco. “Teosofia e antroposofia nell'Italia del primo Novecento.” In *Annali 25: Esoterismo*, edited by Gian Mario Cazzaniga, 569–98. Torino: Einaudi, 2010.
- Pintor, Giaime. *Doppio diario: 1936–1943*. Edited by Mirella Serri. Torino: Einaudi, 1978.
- R[ossi], L[ea]. “Biografia carriera e operosità di Mario Manlio Rossi.” *Bollettino storico reggiano*, 7, no. 24 (1974): 71–77.
- Rossi, Lino. “Comico e felicità nella psicologia pragmatista di Mario Manlio Rossi.” *Rivista di psicologia*, 75, no. 3 (1990): 89–94.
- Rossi, Marco. “Neopaganesimo e arti magiche nel periodo fascista.” In *Annali 25: Esoterismo*,

- edited by Gian Mario Cazzaniga, 599–628. Torino: Einaudi, 2010.
- Rossi, Mario Manlio. “Yeats and Philosophy.” *Cronos* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1947): 19–24.
- . *Pilgrimage in the West*. Translated by Joseph M. Hone. Dublin: Cuala Press, 1933.
- . *Viaggio in Irlanda*. Milano: Doxa, 1932.
- . *Spaccio dei maghi*. Roma: Doxa editrice, 1929.
- Schechtman, Marya. *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Staudenmaier, Peter. *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- Stewart-Steinberg, Suzanne. *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians (1860–1920)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Stuckrad, Kocku von. *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. Translated by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. London: Equinox, 2005.
- Tillich, Paul. *Das Dämonische. Ein Beitrag zur Sinndeutung der Geschichte*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1926.
- Torrini, Maurizio. “Mario Manlio Rossi: un ‘irregolare’ nella cultura del Novecento italiano.” In *Un illuminismo scettico: la ricerca filosofica di Antonio Santucci*, edited by Walter Tega and Luigi Turco, 97–112. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008.
- Versluis, Arthur. *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Wade, Allan, ed. *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*. London: R. Hart-Davis, 1954.



## Book Reviews

Dylan M. Burns. *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. xvii + 321 pp. ISBN: 978-0812245790. \$69.95 / £45.50.

Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library scholars have puzzled over what to make of the predominance of texts typically called “Sethian,” so-called because they emphasize Adam and Eve’s third son, Seth, as savior and revealer. Dylan Burns’ first, lucid and exceptionally well-researched book *Apocalypse of the Alien God* offers the most compelling case since John Turner’s *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* for gauging the historical import of these “Sethians” and placing them in a specific socio-historical milieu. Over the course of seven chapters Burns produces astute readings of the Platonic-Sethian texts *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, *The Three Steles of Seth*, and *Marsanes* in order to support two pairs of arguments. First, the Gnostics who attended Plotinus’ famous philosophy group helped catalyze and fortify the differentiation between Hellenic and Christian identities going forward into the Middle Ages. Second, Sethian literature is best understood when seen as part of the broader class of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. These two primary lines of argument are bolstered by two secondary, somewhat more speculative arguments: a) the Platonic-Sethian texts offer a window into the development of Jewish mysticism between Qumran and the later Hekhalot texts; and b) the theological doctrines and formal elements of this literature point to a provenance in religious groups classed as “Jewish-Christian,” most closely related to the Elchasaites. Each of these arguments is successful, though in varying degrees.

Chapter 1, “Culture Wars,” details the sociological background of the Second Sophistic culture from 50-250CE. As Burns shows, it was in this period

that *Hellenismos* as an identity developed through *paideia* – broad cultural training and adherence to Greek religion and civic cult – and came to reign among elite Hellenophone intellectuals, including the philosophers. Imbricated with this freshly minted identity arose newly constructed visages of “the Orient.” Philosophers of this era including Porphyry, Numenius and Iamblichus increasingly invoke the Orient but judge and subjugate foreign authors below the authority of Plato. Burns’ major contribution in this chapter is to identify an important counter-strain, the “auto-Orientalizing” found in Hermetic literature, Chaldaean Oracles and Platonic-Sethian texts, which instead invokes the prestige and idioms of the Orient in order to authorize alternate discourses about Greek metaphysics. Plotinus’ own writings are the subject of chapter 2, “Plotinus Against his Gnostic Friends,” which Burns reads as indicating Plotinus’ attempts to differentiate and fortify this Hellenic identity against the Platonic-Sethian literature brought to his seminars. The metaphysically sophisticated “Christian friends” who brought *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* were sympathetic to “foreign” doctrines including elect soteriology, the proliferation of intermediary deities between the supreme God and stellar gods, an evil demiurge, the descent of Wisdom/Sophia/the soul, and questioned the eternal and divinely infused nature of matter. It is unfortunate that Burns’ fresh philological reading of *Vita Plotina* 16, which supports reading this group as “Christian friends” and “gnostics” offering their own “school (*heresy*)” in counterdistinction to Hellenic *paideia*, is tucked in an appendix and not in this chapter itself, since it is so critical to all pillars of his argument.

Chapter 3 concerns “Other Ways of Writing” practiced by the Sethian Gnostics. Burns’ close readings parse the distinct ways that Platonic philosophers and Sethian Gnostics approached myths, stories and definitions of imagery. Plato himself thought myths function like “images” whose efficacy was predicated on their fidelity to philosophic truth. Later Platonists, especially Plotinus, would offer allegorical readings of myth as a means to bring eternal truths to temporally bound beings. By contrast, Burns argues that the implications of Sethian literature as a form of Jewish-Christian apocalyptic have not been recognized when reading their approach to philosophy via myth. The emphasis placed on revealed knowledge through the ascent of a seer, pseudepigrapha, and invocation of Oriental authorities all indicate apocalyptic provenance and its attendant claims to authority while adopting Neo-Platonic cosmological and philosophical terminology.

Chapter four marks the turn in the book from the discursive analysis of Neoplatonic authors vis-à-vis Gnostics to analyses of particular Sethian doc-

trines. “The Descent” challenges U. of Nebraska Nag Hammadi doyen John Turner’s reigning partition of Sethian literature into early texts that emphasize the “descent” of a savior figure into this world and later “ascent” models where a seer is transported to heaven. Burns finds this unhelpful. Rather, he argues all Sethian texts presume the heavenly savior figure, typically but not exclusively Seth, making multiple descents to this world in order to save his race or seed. Furthermore, the “corporate religious identity” (79) of the Sethians is argued not to be exclusive but part of a tripartite soteriological model that includes the already saved, the damned, and those undecided capable of salvation should they accept baptism and receive the revealed gnosis. Taken together, these doctrines place the Sethian texts within the idioms of “proto-Orthodox” Christians (“the new race”) and Jewish language of the *genos*.

Chapter Five, “The Ascent,” focuses on eschatology. Here Burns exhibits his remarkable hermeneutical and translation skills in reconstructing the eschatological doctrine of the Sethians, primarily through *Zostrianos*. The cosmological levels of the Sojourn, Repentance and Autogenes aeons are argued to correspond to a tripartite soteriological structure of the converts, the ascetics and the truly elect respectively, with two further lower classes destined to be destroyed at the end of time. This reading challenges a presumed “universalist” reading of Sethian soteriology as well as those reconstructions of texts such as *Marsanes* that presume the world is either “renewed” or “transformed” at the end of time. Instead, the categories of election, the presence of models of reincarnation and the destruction at the end of time clearly point to a Jewish-Christian providence akin to the Elchasaites, and were all argued against specifically by Plotinus.

Readers of this journal may be especially drawn to chapter 6, “The Crown,” dealing with the ritual and divinization practices of the Platonizing-Sethian writers. Burns touches on alphabet mysticism, the “baptism in living water” and its relation to anti-baptismal polemics, visionary ascent, angelification, communal practices, and heavenly liturgies. He dissents from views that label such practices “Sethian theurgy” and instead argues that the practices are consistent with early Christian magical and Jewish ritual traditions, especially *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. His reading is successful and will require very strong counter-arguments from scholars wishing to read these practices from a Greek or Platonic perspective. That said, Burns’ argument that the Platonic-Sethian texts help illuminate the development of Jewish mysticism between the destruction of the second temple and the Hekhalot *corpoi* would have benefited from more analysis and comparison of primary texts themselves. Departing from

his typical close readings, in this chapter Burns tends to cite formal similarities (angelic participation in *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (131); visionary ascent replacing Hekhalot throne mysticism with Platonic metaphysics (136)) that offer more suggestive parallels than strong evidence for his secondary argument.

Chapter 7, “Between Judaism, Christianity, and Neoplatonism” offers a prohibitive reconstruction of the Sethian history and import based on the previous findings. Burns avers that the peculiar mix of Platonic metaphysics, Jewish apocalyptic traditions and Christian baptismal teachings do not point to an origin in any of these three contexts individually but rather to the “borderlines” that challenge our scholarly projection of such categories into the past. The Sethian texts are evidence for how groups drew from a broad well of Jewish mythologumena, priestly lore, and Christian practice to come to an emphasis on encratism, baptismal ideas, Adamic and Sethian lore, reincarnation, and the veneration of Jesus as an incarnation of the savior much like the Elchasaites and later Manichaeans (144). The presence of the Platonizing-Sethian texts in Plotinus’ seminar are also charged to have catalyzed the “acute Hellenization of Platonism,” after which the Platonic canon is closed, interest in “barbaric” ideas is shunned and Platonic philosophy is codified as a culturally Hellenic practice.

On the whole, Burns’ primary arguments are sound and will require formidable counter-arguments in order to be challenged. He also contributes important readings to the case disproving the “Johanine splinter” origin of Sethian literature offered by Alaistar Logan and others. Further, the book is a testament to how certain theoretical approaches – particularly discourse analysis, identity construction and the distancing from “Others” – can offer fresh insights on material while still building on close readings of primary texts. It is unfortunate, then, that this revised dissertation is still writ with an expectation of a specialist’s background in three distinct fields (Neoplatonic philosophy, Sethian Gnostic literature, early Jewish Apocalyptic literature) that will prove challenging for non-specialists. The lack of background information on many of the individual texts analyzed and the assumed knowledge of contemporary debates in each field likely entails that the book will be most rewarding for specialists in Gnosticism, Early Christianity and Middle and Neoplatonic philosophy. Yet all those who are up to the task are urged to read the book, as it is clearly the product of a talented and important new voice in the field.

Matthew J. Dillon

Peter Staudenmaier. *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. vii + 412 pp. ISBN: 9789004264076. €149.00 / \$193.00.

The American historian Peter Staudenmaier has written one of the most thoroughly researched books I have laid my hands on in recent years. His delving into the deep archives is as impressive as his mastery of the scholarly literature. The subject of his outstanding *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Brill, 2014) concerns the controversial ways in which the anthroposophical movement navigated, survived and negotiated its position in the Third Reich and fascist Italy. There are several important lessons to be learned from Staudenmaier's fascinating, detailed and persuasive study.

Staudenmaier pays special attention to the use of the concept of race in the writings of Rudolf Steiner and other prominent German anthroposophists during the 1930s and 40s. The first lesson to be learned from this book is the striking overlap between the anthroposophical and National Socialist versions of the concept of race. Staudenmaier proves this convincingly by doing a close reading of some of Steiner's works (of the originally published texts, *nota bene*, and not of the censored editions published after the fall of the Reich). For me, Staudenmaier's descriptive story reveals, more clearly than before, to what a large extent anthroposophy was theosophy distorted by German chauvinism. The ease by which many German and Austrian anthroposophists accepted the *Blut-und-Boden* teachings, the racism, and the militant nationalism of the NSDAP regime corroborates this fact.

A critical remark regarding Staudenmaier's focus on "race" would be that he refrains from providing a comprehensive portrait of Steiner's esoteric ideas and worldview. Such a picture, even one constructed quickly with broad strokes, would give the reader an idea of the relative importance of the notion of race for Steiner's thinking, and it would also give the reader a hint about what other issues the anthroposophical and the Nazi imaginations could attract or repel. Chapter 4, bearing the subtitle "Ideological affinities between anthroposophy and Nazism," does not really give us this in any substantial way. Furthermore, there is something slightly inconsistent between Staudenmaier's claim that anthroposophy was over time targeted by the Nazis as an "ideological enemy" not because of dissimilarities but because of "ideological proximity," and the observation that while many anthroposophists in Germany cherished the awakening of a New Reich, others denounced it as a form of materialism (145, 245).

In contrast to what today's anthroposophists often claim, it was, according to the author, therefore not ideological conflicts that made the Nazi regime ban anthroposophy on November 15, 1935, or start persecutions on June 9, 1941. The background to 1941's *Aktion gegen Gebietslehren und sogenannte Geheimwissenschaft* ("Campaign against occult doctrines and so called occult sciences"), with its closing down of anthroposophical institutions and imprisoning of leading anthroposophists, is outlined by Staudenmaier as basically a search by the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) for a mission and purpose as an institution. The opportunity to strike out at anthroposophy along with many other esoteric groups came with the peculiar, and for the Nazi regime extremely embarrassing, secret voyage to Scotland made by Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy. This astonishing miscalculation by Hess, which led to his imprisonment in the UK, removed from the Nazi apparatus the strongest support for "alternative" ideas and practices and thus opened things up for the anti-occultist wing with its leading Nazis such as the SD-führer Reinhard Heydrich, Martin Bormann and Joseph Goebbels.

Staudenmaier proves repeatedly how leading persons in the anthroposophical movement were sympathizers or members of the NSDAP, or worked within its organisations. He emphasises that anthroposophy lacked doctrines or ethical principles that could set it in direct opposition to the ruthless Nazi rule. The major deviation between the two German movements detected in *Between Occultism and Nazism* concerns the word "spiritual" (translated from *geistig* and/or *seelisch*) as a way to chisel out a "spiritual racism" from Nazi "materialistic racism." But what did this concept mean? Is not race by definition something bodily? Unfortunately, Staudenmaier never tries to explain this anthroposophical, and general esoteric, use of "spiritual racism." Was this concept merely the outcome of a more or less empty elitist rhetoric, or did it actually have some kind of cognitive coherence? Learning from Steiner's pen that pregnant European women should avoid reading "Negro novels" since their babies might then turn into mulattos, (51) one doubts Steiner's will to think these matters through clearly.

One question that might be asked concerning the popularity of racist ideas in esoteric circles during what Staudenmaier calls "the modern occult revival," that is the period from the 1870s up until the Second World War – he even talks about occultism as a "mass phenomenon" in Germany in the 1930s, a statement I consider to be an exaggeration – is whether there exists a special affinity between racism and occultism. In *Alkemi, romantik och rasvetenskap: om en vetenskaplig tradition* ("Alchemy, romanticism, and race science: About a sci-

entific tradition”) from 1994, the Swedish historian of ideas Hertha Hansson identifies an epistemological tradition of “empirical idealism.” Hansson’s examples of this tradition are alchemy, romantic *Naturphilosophie* and modern physical anthropology. According to her, people within these traditions tried to move from observable empirical facts to the identification of spiritual (ideal) qualities. Not actually working within the field of esotericism studies myself, I might have missed scholarly discussions along Hansson’s lines; in that case, I look forward to taking part of them in the future.<sup>1</sup> I also believe this to be an important path to follow because the study of esotericism often tends to isolate itself from the study of modern religion and culture in general; anthroposophy is of course the perfect bridge between the obscure world of occultism and the overarching intellectual and cultural history.

At any rate, a significant consequence of the hostility from certain influential members of the NSDAP and a number of institutions in the Third Reich toward the Anthroposophical Society in Germany, the anthroposophical Christian Community and other related ideological or *Weltanschauung* organisations was the process whereby the anthroposophical movement downplayed its ideological, religious or theological side and instead cultivated its practical side: “When faced with unremitting opposition from the anti-occult Nazis, anthroposophists did not retreat into the private world of spiritual ideas but focused instead on practical efforts, demonstrating the worth of Waldorf schools, anthroposophical medicine, and biodynamic agriculture for the New Germany.” (144)

The typical – and when it comes to survival in a non-anthroposophical environment, highly successful – profile of the movement is thus a result of a forced reorientation during the Third Reich. Outsiders today consequently identify anthroposophy most notably with Waldorf schools, biodynamic farming and alternative health products, not with teachings about Aryan root races and warnings against degenerating Ahrimanic influences. The contemporary persona of anthroposophy as an internationalist, humanistic and even “female” movement that experiments with different crops and “eurythmic” dances actually brings anthroposophy back closer to (the persona of) the Theo-

---

<sup>1</sup> The editor kindly reminds me that Wouter Hanegraaff’s *New Age Religion: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) emphasises the importance of *Naturphilosophie* for the rise of modern esotericism, and furthermore informs me that this track is followed for the case of Steiner in Helmut Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis, 1884–1945*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007) and in Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

sophical Society that Steiner and his allies disparaged and broke away from to craft a purely Western mysticism on German soil.

The last two chapters in Staudenmaier's book concern the destiny of anthroposophy in fascist Italy. As strongly researched as the chapters on the German situation, these chapters tend, however, to become all too focused on certain crucial individuals (among them Julius Evola, popular today among brown- or black-shirtish young intellectuals) and their engagement with fascism. Something about the overall view of how Italian anthroposophy in general related to fascist ideas and ethics is absent. Except for minor critical comments such as the above, Staudenmaier's *Between Occultism and Nazism* is a splendid, well-argued and meticulous contribution to the study of one of the most important of the new religious movements of modern Europe.

Stefan Arvidsson

Per Faxneld and Jesper Aa. Petersen, eds. *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*. Oxford and New York City: Oxford University Press, 2013. 289 pp. ISBN: 9780199779246. £60.00 (hardcover), £22.50 (paperback).

Few new religious movements evoke such sensationalism and fear as Satanism, a term used collectively in reference to a variety of magico-religious spiritual paths that venerate, in one way or another, the traditional bogeyman of Christendom. Following on from where Petersen's previous edited volume, *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (Ashgate, 2009), left off, *The Devil's Party* contains twelve papers from academics currently involved in the expanding field of Satanism Studies. In doing so, it draws from historical, sociological, and religious studies perspectives, providing a welcome interdisciplinary addition to a rapidly expanding corpus.

*The Devil's Party* opens with a handy little introduction in which the editors outline – and, briefly, critically evaluate – prior research into this controversial subject. This is invaluable for readers not already well acquainted with the field. The rest of the book is divided into four quarters, each containing three papers. The first is titled “The Question of History: Precursors and Currents,” and begins with Mikael Häll's discussion of those unusual individuals who claimed a relationship with the Devil in the court accounts of Early Modern Sweden. Noting that at the time some considered “the Devil as a kind of god of the outlawed and enemy of the established order” (37), he presents a convincing argument that these individuals could – from a scholar of Satanism's viewpoint – be considered Satanists. Although a fascinating account of Swedish folk religion and popular belief in the time of the witch trials, the paper lacks reference or integration with wider studies into Early Modern witchcraft beliefs across Europe; in particular the paper would have benefited from reference to the works of Emma Wilby, which deal with similar beliefs in Britain. Ruben van Luijk follows this with his paper on the “Romantic Satanists,” members of the nineteenth-century literati whom he considers to have been sorely neglected in prior studies of religious Satanism. He aims to reclaim these figures as forefathers of modern Satanic thought, arguing that their reappraisal of Satan as a heroic, anti-establishment figure made later Satanism possible. It's an interesting hypothesis, though he fails to illustrate any explicit links between these “Romantic Satanists” and more recent practitioners. Faxneld then presents his chapter on the Satanic ideas of Stanislaw Przybyszewski (1868–1927), a Polish decadent author and anarchist who made his name in Berlin's *fin de siècle* avant-garde. Exploring Przybyszewski's views

on Satan, human evolution, and the innate satanic nature of women, Faxneld considers him a figure of particular significance for being “probably the first person ever to attempt formulating an actual *system* of satanic thought,” (54) going so far as to suggest that he be considered “the first Satanist.” (74)

Part Two, “The Black Pope and the Church of Satan,” is devoted to the activities of Anton Szandor LaVey (1930–1997), the American founder of the Church of Satan and primary theorist behind the occult current of LaVeyan Satanism. In her paper, Amina Olander Lap analyses LaVey’s early written work, and employs Paul Heelas’ understandings of “self spirituality” in order to draw comparisons with the contemporary New Age and Human Potential Movements. Although identifying some of LaVey’s sources, it is sadly not explained how he developed these concepts, or how they changed in his later work. Eugene V. Gallagher proceeds with a textual analysis of “The Book of Satan,” the shortest part of LaVey’s *The Satanic Bible* (1969), exploring how and why he selectively used text appropriated from the pseudonymous Ragnar Redbeard’s far right tract, *Might is Right*, presenting the interesting argument that LaVey was more innovative than has previously been assumed. In his chapter, Asbjørn Dyrendal examines the relationship between LaVey and conspiracy culture, highlighting that while “The Black Pope” was contemptuous of conspiracy theorists, there was also a conspiracist element to LaVey’s own thought, particularly regarding his beliefs in societal threats to human individuality. Papers such as these do scholarship a great service in fleshing out the life and thought of one of the United States’ most important religious figures of the twentieth century.

Three sociological chapters are then provided in “The Legacy of Dr. LaVey: The Satanic Milieu Today,” which opens with James R. Lewis’ discussion of conversion to Satanism. Based on his own on-going research, it draws heavily on comparisons with conversion to contemporary Paganism, which is of great interest but also distracts a little from the topic at hand. Petersen follows with his discussion of the articulation of transgression within Satanism, highlighting how practitioners often play up to sensationalist stereotypes by using blasphemy, violence, and political extremism, but conversely sanitize their beliefs by denouncing acts such as child sacrifice. Rafal Smoczynski then offers an examination of the web-based Satanic collective in Poland, interpreting them as proponents of Enlightenment liberalism; an interesting contrast could have been drawn with Poland’s black metal community, who also make heavy use of Satanic iconography but are neglected here.

The final quarter is devoted to “Post-Satanism, Left-Hand Paths, and Beyond:

Visiting the Margins,” and begins with Kennet Granholm’s ground-breaking discussion of terminology. Rightly criticising “Satanism” as a word carrying pejorative connotations, he suggests that scholars studying the phenomenon replace it with the more accurate “Left Hand Path.” Conversely, he argues that the term “Post-Satanism” has utility in describing those followers of “dark spirituality” who have moved away from the figure of Satan but continue with their antinomian religious stance. As for case studies to support his well thought-out arguments, he turns to the Temple of Set and the Dragon Rouge. The following chapter consists of Fredrik Gregorius’ pioneering discussion of Luciferian Witchcraft, an esoteric current that blends elements of Satanism with contemporary Paganism, and which will prove a great starting point for those, like myself, engaged in the study of the “Traditional Witchcraft” movement. The volume is rounded off with Jacob C. Senholt on the Order of Nine Angles, a British-based white supremacist group whom he has extensively studied through his doctoral research. Senholt’s excellent work will undoubtedly be of use to law enforcement alongside academia, considering the Order’s embrace of extreme violence and history of uniting with militant Islamism in their quest to overturn the “old order.”

As can be expected with any academic anthology, there is a disparity in the quality and level of research that has gone into these papers; Senholt’s for instance is based on his in-depth, investigative PhD research, whereas Gregorius’ is based largely on a reading of several key texts. That is not to say that his work is of lesser value, for it will be of clear advantage to many scholars, but this is nevertheless a caveat worth bearing in mind. Though attractively titled, I must question the choice of “modernity” within the subtitle, a term which carries with it sociological implications. The editors do not use their introduction to explain exactly what they mean by “modernity” here, which I consider unfortunate; is Satanism a product of late modernity, or should it be considered post-modern? These questions are left unanswered. Also unfortunate is the book’s lack of imagery, although Oxford University Press have published it with a striking cover design featuring a detail from Andre Jacques Victor Orsel’s *Good and Evil* (1832).

The majority of scholars featured in this volume are working from within northern parts of continental Europe; three are based in Norway, another three in Sweden, two in Denmark, and one each in Finland, Poland, the Netherlands and the United States. If this is indicative of the areas where Satanism studies are most active – and I believe it is – then this is indeed interesting, contrasting for instance with the Anglo-American domination of Pagan

studies and the fact that the majority of Satanisms described in the volume are Anglo-American in origin. Most contributors seem to place their work largely in an etic category, and the anthology therefore provides an intriguing counterbalance to another recent volume in the study of western esotericism with a focus on Paganism, *Pathways in Modern Western Magic* (Concrescent Press, 2012), edited by Nevill Drury and containing contributors from a number of practitioner-scholars. From a perfunctory examination of those active within the field of Satanism studies, it appears that the majority have adopted an etic approach to the subject; this clearly contrasts with the situation in Pagan studies, where serious questions have been raised regarding the dominant role played by active practitioner-scholars.

Overall, I would have no problem recommending this volume to anyone involved in witchcraft studies, the academic study of Western esotericism, or research into new religious movements. Certainly, it will be obligatory reading for all those active in Satanism studies. It is an excellent piece of work, and reading through it, I am comforted that the future of Satanism studies is in good hands.

Ethan Doyle White

Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler. *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013. 325 pp. ISBN: 978-3-525-54020-6. €79.99.

In his paper “Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism” Georg Luck writes:

The need of pagan believers to enter into direct contact with their gods led to the development of a certain technique or a set of techniques codified during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, it seems, and given the name “theurgy.”<sup>1</sup>

Having read Luck’s exposition of Neoplatonic theurgy a decade ago his constructive assertions had an impact on me as imaginative, engaging, and critically challenging. However, as I began to expand into the domains of other established academic works on Neoplatonic theurgy I began to realise how bedazzled I was at times with the monolithic treatment of the historical category of theurgy. This I observed as manifesting through the perpetuation of the rigid dualism between belief and praxis, with the latter being maltreated as a thoughtless and superstitious form of religious expression by Protestantism’s exclusive insistence on the centrality of belief. Addressing this, and in particular responding to biases portraying Neoplatonic theurgy as purely acts of irrational ritual, Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler’s *Theurgy in Late Antiquity* challenges the traditional monolithic scope of the study of Neoplatonic theurgy.

Tanaseanu-Döbler introduces her study of theurgy in Late Antiquity in response to the recognition that:

Theurgy is commonly taken to denote a complex of rites which are based on the so-called Chaldean Oracles, a collection of oracles in hexameters, which were probably composed during the late second century AD. These rituals are mostly known through Neoplatonic sources, who engage in a passionate debate about their relevance to the salvation of the soul and thus to the philosopher’s ultimate goal. (9)

Continuing from this point she also presents the objectives of her thesis as a rectification of the dominance of the debate of rationality and irrationality that has historically characterised the study of theurgy deriving from unjust

---

<sup>1</sup> Georg Luck, “Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism”, in *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 185.

“grand tales of late antique decay.”<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning of her book Tanaseanu-Döbler discusses the merits and criticisms of some prolific scholars investigating theurgy in Late Antiquity, such as Hans Lewy, Ruth Majercik, Gregory Shaw, Sarah Iles Johnston, and Polymnia Athanassiadi. In the endeavour to avoid indiscriminate references to ideas and practices that have come to constitute a historical category of theurgy in Late Antiquity she argues that her major methodological consideration is to limit her material mostly to Neoplatonic literature as the source of the emic representations analysed in terms of etic notions of ritual. To achieve this she advocates the employment of a meta-language terminology to enlist comparable phenomena at the object level in careful reference to specific vocabulary and synonyms employed by each individual theurgist located in source materials. In addition, she proposes to investigate the potential for a scholarly reinvention of theurgy as an experiential ritual tradition legitimised by “the assumption that there is a level of reality transcending the common everyday experience” (17) and how this may impact on the practices and worldview of the individual ritualist.

In her discussion of how theurgic philosophy and praxis is related to notions of spiritual ascent and ritual Tanaseanu-Döbler consults the *Chaldean Oracles* and commentaries in a thoroughly well-referenced fashion to identify some of the characteristic elements of theurgic discourse. From her research these are presented as variants of sacrificial acts and objects; purificatory initiations and transcendental ascents; ritualised signs, tokens, and verbal formulas; conjurations of what might be called hypercosmic and encosmic entities, along with their methods of manifestation in sacred space and visionary experiences.

As a critical response to previous assertions that theurgy is merely ritual performance in contrast to philosophical contemplation, Tanaseanu-Döbler radically argues that ritual, as observed from a careful reading of the *Chaldean Oracles*, is comparatively secondary in importance with the main textual basis dealing with metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology. Despite the general consensus regarding the ‘oriental’ character of the *Chaldean Oracles* Tanaseanu-Döbler argues, which in my opinion is a methodologically sound and magnificently insightful thesis, that:

The survey of the ritual aspect of the *Chaldean Oracles* has thus left us with a more restricted material basis for theurgy than the usual reconstructions which use later

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the opinion of E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 236–55.

material to fill the gaps: the initiation ritual, invocations and formulae triggering visions, apotropaic sacrifices. All the rites alluded to have their parallels in Greek religious thought and practice. What the Oracles do is to take up common ritual patterns and interpret and develop them along the lines of their Platonic-Stoic theology and their penchant for esoteric wisdom. (43)

To support her argument she then concludes that the *Chaldean Oracles* “play freely with various philosophical or ritual elements found in their historical context,” (43) with many theurgists appraising and drawing from Pythagorean, Orphic, and other esoterically inclined religious discourses of Late Antiquity. Hence, for further constructive analysis the *Chaldean Oracles* should not be consulted as a revelatory holy book of an established community, but rather as a text formulating a worldview accessed through philosophical contemplation and ritual praxis based on established esoteric discourses competing with other religious texts of the period, such as Gnostic and Hermetic texts, the *Greek Magical Papyri*, and so on.

In establishing this analytic framework Tanaseanu-Döbler engages in a systematic exhibition of the fundamental personalities of Neoplatonic theurgy. She commences with the Plotinian circle locating the foundations for the dialogue between Porphyry and Iamblichus. Her treatment of Plotinus demonstrates how he can be associated with the historical category of theurgy as an esoteric discourse by highlighting his interests in exotic Eastern religiosity, astrology and horoscopes, the significance of ascent as documented in the *Chaldean Oracles*, and his willingness to have his daimon summoned by an Egyptian priest.

Moving on to Porphyry she remains cautiously attentive to the development and variety of his thought through close examination of the remains of his written treatises. Here she skillfully avoids a monolithic representation of Porphyry produced normally in contrast to Iamblichus, with the former stressing philosophical contemplation as the ultimatum for salvation and the latter the specifics of theurgic ritual. By cross-examining his *Philosophy from Oracles* and commentaries on sacrifice, animating statues, signs and sacred space, conjurations, purifications, and divine possession, with the *Letter to Anebo*, which presents ideas in contrast to the ethos of *Philosophy from Oracles*, Tanaseanu-Döbler demonstrates the diversity of Porphyry’s thought and the need for methodological sensitivity when examining the diverse nature of Neoplatonic theurgy as both *technē* and *philosophia*.

Maintaining the same methodological tactic, Tanaseanu-Döbler aptly criticises the inconclusive use of the term ‘rationality’ and discriminative character

of the appellation ‘irrational’ when addressing the legacy of Iamblichus. Here she stresses that although Iamblichus did favour theurgy over purely theological speculation, his worldview embracing the miraculous is structured according to specific rules and patterns of philosophical argumentation. Although he responds to Porphyry’s *Letter to Anebo* with *De Mysteriis* defining theurgy as *technē* and *episteme* as a “universal Platonic science of ritual, with declared roots in ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Chaldean’ lore,” (107) she draws attention to the fact that Iamblichus elsewhere in his Pythagorising writings affirms the secondary status of ritual in favour of contemplative Pythagorean philosophy. For this reason Tanaseanu-Döbler attests that Iamblichus’ construction of theurgy is not merely a product of his rendition of the *Chaldean Oracles*, but also draws inspiration from more contemplative traditions.

In her discussion of theurgy in the fourth and early fifth century Tanaseanu-Döbler reviews theurgy, philosophy, and the priestly life from hymns, letters, and other writings of Emperor Julian. Salutius is also integrated into her study, along with Eunapius of Sardes and his *Vitae sophistratum et philosophorum*, which construes theurgy in a similar fashion to Iamblichus as “one of the generic terms used to describe religious skills that allow for immediate, flexible and delocalized contact with the gods.” (160) She then continues with Synesius of Cyrene and Hierocles, peaking with an outstanding evaluation of the works of Proclus, demonstrating how he draws on both Chaldean and Orphic elements in addition to his favourable stance towards the Greek philosopher to construct the praxis of theurgy as an initiation rite of purification and ascent. She ends by presenting some other late Neoplatonists, such as Hermias and Damascus, before arriving at her conclusive portrait of theurgy as a self-contained yet expansive ritual tradition encompassing an array of pagan theologies, philosophies, and practices of Late Antiquity.

Tanaseanu-Döbler’s journey through the evolving historical relationship of theurgy and ritualisation culminates with her conviction that it is a Neoplatonic discourse on ritual complete with theologies typical of the second century CE, a Platonic worldview, and elements drawn from magic and mystery cults. In regards to the authority of the *Chaldean Oracles* she reveals that they can either be read “ritually” or “doctrinally.” Speaking of the distinct ritual character of theurgy her hermeneutics encapsulate the desired effects as alluding to visible manifestations of divine presence, and/or purifications and initiations to assist the soul in ascents to its divine place of origin, connecting it with the gods. However, she clarifies that in emic self-representations theurgy is not understood merely as the ritual equivalent of theology, “but emerges from the

sources as something distinct [...] a specific tradition received from the gods, relying on the knowledge and expert use of symbola and synthemata sown by the demiurge into the cosmos.” (281)

A further distinct aspect of her thesis carefully posits that theurgy as a ritual tradition is in reality “rituals in ink” (278) by individual authors; each with their own preferences and dispositions providing a discursive array of possible representations and applications of metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology. Hence, to argue for theurgy as a coherent whole would be fruitless for further analysis. What one should instead focus on is how theurgy as a discursive product of Neoplatonism offers avenues for the pagan intellectual to experience the doctrines and truths of these “rituals in ink,” in an embodied fashion.

Despite *Theurgy in Late Antiquity* being an insightful and challenging publication engaging with necessary discursive elucidations and historiographic reconsiderations, Tanaseanu-Döbler could have extended the theoretical and methodological scope of her hermeneutic model by engaging with a far more interdisciplinary approach. Although she makes references to anthropological studies of ritual, and in particular the works of Catherine Bell and Kevin Schilbrack in the beginning of the book, she neglects a systematic consideration of theurgic ritual from the perspective of Bell’s distinct notion of “ritualization” and Schilbrack’s “embodied metaphysics.” Had she done so she would surely have presented a far more productive interpretation of ritual, illustrating why one should address Neoplatonic theurgy in terms of it being an inclusive tradition of ritual and philosophy as developed by the historical protagonists of Neoplatonism that she makes reference to. From this perspective she could have argued in a more precise fashion how her study constitutes a collapse of the rigid divide between belief and praxis and a critical reconsideration of the misguided attempts to contrast “rational” philosophy and “irrational” ritual. Furthermore, in her conclusion she writes that “theurgy, this product of Neoplatonism, has the advantage to offer the pagan intellectual a possibility of experiencing what he thinks and writes about,” and then refers to theurgic ritual as “an embodied, concrete way of experiencing doctrines and truths developed on paper.” (283) Unfortunately though, Tanaseanu-Döbler does not clarify how ritual embodiment may constitute a spatio-temporal environment defined by “a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’,”<sup>3</sup> and how theurgy as a model of participation and embodied metaphysics “serves as saving or liberating knowledge with which one can properly

---

<sup>3</sup> Bell, Catherine, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74.

orient oneself in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Tanaseanu-Döbler’s research is systematic and resourceful when identifying and analysing the dialectics of emic representations of Neoplatonic theurgy unifying belief and praxis. However, Tanaseanu-Döbler fails to critically engage with how etic considerations of rituals as narratives of religious instruction addressed in disciplines such as textual criticism, and rituals as embodied modes of practice studied within fields of anthropology might differ in methodology and objective. Unfortunately this obscures her conclusion by not clarifying whether theurgy can be presented as a mode of action similar to Bell’s notion of “ritualization” and Schilbrack’s “embodied metaphysics,” rendering the study of theurgy as an experiential mode of embodiment an irrelevant discussion.

Damon Zacharias Lycourinos

---

<sup>4</sup> Schilbrack, Kevin, ‘Myth and Metaphysics’. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 48, no. 2 (2000): 69.

Marco Pasi. *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013. xiii + 238 pp. ISBN: 1844656969. £17.99.

Within the colorful panorama of esoteric spiritual teachers scattered across modern European history, the deeply enigmatic figure of Aleister Crowley stands out for his mercurial character, simultaneously impulsive and intransigent, stubbornly uncompromising yet completely unpredictable. In the course of his often flamboyant life (1875–1947), Crowley ranged over a wide spectrum of spiritual, political, and cultural perspectives, shifting continually between seemingly opposite poles. Marco Pasi’s nuanced study offers a masterful guide to Crowley’s ceaseless ideological peregrinations.

Originally published in Italian in 1999, with a revised German translation appearing in 2006, Pasi’s work is now available in English. This is the most comprehensive of the three editions of the book. It is thoroughly and creatively researched, in constant critical dialogue with the existing secondary literature, and has been substantially updated. Building on James Webb’s pioneering insights into the entanglement of occultism and politics, Pasi fully succeeds in his stated goal; this work makes a substantial contribution toward normalizing Crowley as a subject of scholarly research. Though Crowley liked to invent grandiose designations for himself, Pasi reveals a more ordinary side of his life and shows that much of his interest in and association with strikingly contrary political currents stemmed from a mundane search for followers and influence. As prophet of an antinomian esotericism, Crowley moved restlessly between left and right. One of the book’s paradoxical findings is that Crowley’s radical individualism went hand in hand with an abiding attraction to totalitarianism.

Pasi provides a fresh perspective on Crowley by focusing not on the scandalous aspects of his persona but on his political inclinations and involvements, while recognizing that for Crowley spiritual concerns were paramount. From his stormy sojourn in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, beginning in 1898, and his world travels and experiences with different varieties of magic and initiation, Crowley developed a new religion he called Thelema, under the motto “do what thou wilt.”

In addition to the obvious Nietzschean elements in his outlook, Pasi also discerns a “strong component of social Darwinism” in Crowley’s works (48) and traces the influence of Spencer and Haeckel on his thought. The book includes perceptive remarks on Crowley’s “organicism vision” of social life (49). In 1923 Crowley described his ideal social order as “a Patriarchal-Feudal system run by initiated Kings.” (152) A patrician disdain for democracy, along with contempt

for bourgeois values, animated much of his storied libertinage and emphatic rejection of conventionality, whether sexual or aesthetic or societal. This often as not put him in unusual company, from Celtic revivalism to pro-German pro-paganda during WWI. Pasi reflects thoughtfully on the connections between Crowley's dispensationalist upbringing and his adult enthrallment with the idea of a secret circle of adepts: the trope of a brotherhood of the elect transposed from fundamentalist Protestantism to Western esotericism.

Some of the material here will be familiar for readers acquainted with other streams of modern esoteric thought, such as Crowley's "contempt for the masses" (67) and his preoccupation with claiming a "scientific" mantle for his own teachings, or the role of Blavatskyan Theosophy as a lingua franca allowing esotericists from different traditions to converse with one another. Other facets may be more surprising, such as Crowley's occasionally positive views of Bolshevism. Pasi reports that "after the First World War and especially in the 1930s, Crowley was increasingly perceived by the police and the secret services of various countries as being involved in left-wing radical movements." (125) In his own words, however, Crowley was "absolutely opposed to any ideas of social revolution." (66)

The book presents a detailed analysis of Crowley's fascination with both Nazism and Stalinism, as well as an insightful assessment of his affinities with advocates of the Conservative Revolution, and quotes Crowley referring to his "reactionary conservatism." (34) Pasi gives full weight to the "anti-democratic and elitist implications" of Crowley's spiritual message (47) while reminding readers of the ambiguities involved. Despite the fundamental elitism of the Golden Dawn, and of Crowley's own conception of esoteric leadership and of a spiritual aristocracy, he contributed to a kind of democratization of esoteric doctrine by divulging secret Golden Dawn teachings after the collapse of the Order. Pasi refers to this as Crowley's "democratization of magic." (61)

Crowley's far-flung political dalliances were not as ephemeral as they may seem. Pasi devotes extensive attention to their twists and turns, on the basis of archival and secondary sources, minutely reconstructing the nature of Crowley's relationship with various political figures, some of whom eventually became quite prominent. It isn't always clear what sort of influence Crowley might have had on these figures, if any, but these episodes do provide illuminating perspective on the range of politically engaged individuals who were at some point drawn to occultism. Crowley's ambition seems to have been to project his religious message as a counterpart to various political programs in an effort to unsettle any established order, and in this quest his prospective partners (real

or imaginary) oscillated between apparent polar opposites, from Mussolini to Trotsky to Stalin to Hitler. Crowley nurtured initial sympathies for Italian Fascism but eventually turned against the Duce, in part because of Crowley's expulsion from Italy – an Italian police report decried “obscene and perverse sexual practices” overseen by Crowley at his “Abbey of Thelema” in Sicily (127) – and in part because of Mussolini's rapprochement with the church; adamant opposition to Christianity was one of the mainstays of Crowley's worldview.

His attitudes toward Nazism were just as convoluted. Crowley remained convinced to the end of his life that he had “influenced Hitler.” (54) He nonetheless came to conclude, in Pasi's words, that Hitler “was not a true initiate.” (58) Pasi sees Crowley's eventual rejection of Nazism as due principally to its statist and collectivist character; an alternative way of framing the same point is that Crowley considered Nazism too plebeian, not aristocratic enough. Through the *Ordo Templi Orientis* or OTO, Crowley played a significant role as “spiritual guide to various personalities in German occultism.” (72) Like virtually everything else in Crowley's life, this has given rise to a wild profusion of conspiracist claims and counter-claims about his supposed deeds. Pasi is resolutely critical of the “Nazi occultism” genre, which portrays Crowley as a secret inspiration for Hitler. While Crowley did sometimes harbor aspirations along these lines, nothing came of them. But speculation was rampant in esoteric circles. After Crowley faked his own suicide in Portugal in 1930 with the assistance of Fernando Pessoa, René Guénon claimed that Crowley staged the event in order to go to Berlin to serve as Hitler's “secret adviser” (110). Other rumors circulating at the time claimed that Crowley had been assassinated by agents of the Catholic church.

Such notions, so prevalent in the esoteric milieu, serve as the basis for the most incisive sections in the book. Pasi's extended analysis of the intense interest in Crowley among conspiracy theorists and in Traditionalist circles notes the “strong link between conspiracy theories and Western esotericism.” (118) By sober and patient examination of the evidence, Pasi works his way painstakingly through the competing claims about Crowley's various political activities. His account of the Hess episode in particular is admirably cautious and restrained. According to the more fantastic tales, Rudolf Hess's unexpected flight to Britain in 1941 was the result of occult machinations (followers of Rudolf Steiner feature prominently in some versions of this legend); less fanciful variants center on the alleged efforts by British intelligence operatives to lure the Nazi luminary to Britain and sow confusion within the German leadership. Pasi concludes that even these latter plans did not include Crowley;

proponents of the idea “decided that Crowley could not be used for an operation of this type.” (91) His marginal part in the affair consisted in an offer of assistance to British officers once Hess had been taken into custody. In this as in other cases, Pasi gently but pointedly rebuts the perennially popular beliefs about Crowley’s ostensible involvement in an occult conspiracy.

There are a few details that have been overlooked in this superb study which may be worth pursuing further. Apart from a brief reference to Kerry Bolton in a footnote, there is no mention of current representatives of far-right enthusiasm for Crowley, such as Keith Preston or Troy Southgate. The parallels to Julius Evola – who took a notably sympathetic view of Crowley – could be examined more thoroughly; along with thinkers like Evola and Ernst Jünger, Crowley’s “absolute individualism” (48) aligns him with the so-called *anarchici di destra* or anarchists of the right, an under-studied factor in the history of modern esotericism. While Pasi does note the widespread antisemitism in interwar occult circles (70), and examines Pessoa’s antisemitism, there are only passing references to Crowley’s own racial and ethnic views, such as his invocation of Gobineau (179). This is a missed opportunity; racial and ethnic sentiments provide an instructive vantage point from which to assess the political dimensions of occult thought.

Like his racial politics, Crowley’s sexual politics get relatively little substantive attention here. Presumably that is a response to the excessive concentration on sex in other treatments; Pasi’s aim may be to counter the usual obsession with Crowley’s putative transgressions. But the topic warrants more sustained analysis, not least in light of the importance of sex magic to the OTO. Crowley’s bisexuality and his homosexual relationships inevitably took on a political character in the constricted Victorian cultural context of his youth. Pasi does regard Crowley’s “attack on bourgeois values” (47) and his anti-Christian emphasis as closely connected to his conception of sexual liberty. But Crowley’s championing of a Dionysian occultism could be a fine opportunity for a careful feminist critique, for example, a chance to explore the political implications of a spirituality built around the dictum “do what thou wilt.”

Beyond considerations like these, several of Pasi’s provocative and thoughtful conclusions deserve further discussion. It is easy to agree with his eminently sensible rejection of the claim that there was an intrinsic connection between Crowley’s Thelemic teachings and Nazism or the extreme right (136); the connections were episodic, inconsistent, and historically contingent, not inherent to Crowley’s ideology. But several strands in Pasi’s argument miss the mark. For one thing, “universalism” won’t help distinguish Thelema from Nazism

or Fascism, as both National Socialism and Italian Fascism had pronounced universalist pretensions themselves. Second, a more thoroughgoing appraisal of Crowley's racial views would be needed to determine whether there were racist components to his religious teachings.

But Pasi's larger case is important: it is pointless to reduce the complexity and breadth of Crowley's ideas and influence to their political dimension, and even more pointless to flatten out that political dimension to a simple matter of far-right affinities. Both the historical record and the contemporary profile of Crowley-inspired currents are much more multifaceted. Crowley's own politics were, in the end, too confused to be easily categorized as simply right-wing. The same is true, of course, for many other esoteric figures.

Finally, why see politics as a "temptation"? Why not see political engagement and political judgement as legitimate expectations for any person who feels called to present a public set of spiritual teachings, especially when those teachings make concrete claims about the state of the world and the condition of society? Perhaps those who see themselves as prophets have an obligation to partake in political discernment and dialogue. The underlying problem is that this conception of political participation and social consciousness is sharply at odds with the self-image of so many esoteric teachers and occult provocateurs.

These are exactly the kind of reflections and disputes that a historically grounded study like this is meant to generate. Pasi reasons that Crowley's "messianic convictions" (139) led him to pursue potential adherents and converts wherever possible, regardless of political camps. A more fundamental factor may have to do with disinterest in and scorn for the supposedly petty world of political distinctions and debates. That sort of credulous condescension is a common enough feature of esoteric thinking, one that merits historically informed scrutiny. Crowley's contemporary influence extends across a remarkably wide spectrum, from individualist anarchism to the authoritarian far right; his version of spirituality appears compatible with both libertarianism and totalitarianism. The history Pasi recounts bears considerable relevance not just for those interested in Crowley himself but for those studying related tendencies, from Wicca to Theosophy to Rosicrucianism and beyond. Whether those drawn to esotericism acknowledge it or not, the politics of the occult are an increasingly significant subject for scholarship. This book marks a critical step in that promising direction.

Peter Staudenmaier